

# TOGETHER

FRIDAY NIGHTS AT THE ROXY

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For Lawrence Finney and Ryan Goldhammer  
Death is truly the hardest part of life  
    Not for those who have passed  
But for those who you've left behind.



## What they know 'bout us

You might know me  
From an era when no one knew  
    About us  
    When we were together  
    When we were underground  
    Damn, I miss us  
If you're one of us from back in the day  
    Then yeah, without a doubt  
        We crossed paths  
    It's even likely that we danced  
        All night  
    Yeah, that's you and yeah it's me,  
        Yeah that's us...  
In a world constantly changing  
    We can't ever forget to be  
        Us



# 1.

In the late eighties while the disco era was fading another scene with the same intense love for music was just beginning. They expressed themselves through dancing in harmonic movements that were specific to each individual and their culture was based around peace, love, unity and respect. I discovered the rave scene in the early-nineties when I was thirteen years old and by the time that I was sixteen tragically the true essence of the culture was beginning to fade as it became more main stream.

My name's Ramia Davis but people call me Rama for short I'm a black girl from Brooklyn, New York at least that's where I was born. At the not so bright age of six while playing with matches I accidentally burned our entire four story apartment building down. We didn't have any place to live after that and my mother was left with no choice but to move us into a homeless shelter upstate.

When we arrived in Kingston there were hardly any sidewalks or streetlights and with no people walking about the place seemed deserted. I longed to be back in good ole Brooklyn running around our cramped apartment in my pajamas. My fear of werewolves was becoming more evident now that I lived in a place that had no streetlights and changed into a pitch black abyss once the sun went down. Every night

I'd lie in bed imagining the bloodthirsty beast lurking outside the building waiting to attack me and it didn't help that the shelter was located in the basement of an old church.

I tried sleeping with a teddy bear wishing so badly that it could protect me from the monsters keeping it by my side every night just in case he miraculously came to life when I needed him most. Unfortunately teddy proved to be nothing more than a stuffed doll and for the rest of my childhood I always dreaded bed time out of fear that I'd eventually be eaten by a creature of the night.

Within a few months my mother was back on her feet, she'd managed to become a successful drug dealer while working two jobs. We moved into a spacious house that was very nice but also very lonely. I'd always shared a room with my sisters back in Brooklyn and I liked it that way now that we had bedrooms of our own they hardly came out of them. My mother wasn't around much anymore either so she rarely had time for us but she tried to keep us happy with money.

That may have been enough for my two sisters but it was never good enough for me, I just wasn't built that way. I needed a mother to tell me that she loved me and teach me about boys, a mother to answer the many questions that growing girls have. I wanted someone to look over my report card with me while telling me how important an education was but my mother never told me any of that. I never knew what love was or how a caring embrace felt and since these were things that money couldn't buy I knew that I could never have them.

My father hadn't been in my life since I was a toddler so my memories of him were vague, as a matter of fact there were never any males in my home. I never had a stepfather because my mother became a lesbian right after she left my

dad. She stopped wearing makeup and skirts, cut her hair short and ditched her purse for a wallet.

Her sexual preference and her illegal hustle were two secrets I had to keep and although being Muslim wasn't a secret I learned sooner than later that it was best to keep that to myself too. There were no Masjid's or other Muslims in my town and people were pretty ignorant about it. That also meant that we didn't celebrate any holidays so there were never any opportunities for us to come together as a family. My family consisted of people living separate lives barely paying any attention to one another and my home turned out to be nothing more than a dwelling to grow up in.

I preferred to keep my head buried in a good book rather than facing reality and its awful truth...that no one in this world cared about me. I've always been touched by love stories so that's what I would spend most of my time reading.

I liked to hideout in my secluded back yard where a monstrous tree branch hung pretty low to the ground that's where I'd sit dangling my feet. Reading helped me to forget especially when I read my favorite story "Romeo and Juliet". It was the happiest and saddest story I'd ever known and I knew deep within my heart that Shakespeare meant for their souls to live on in the afterlife...true love never dies. Some days I would end up reading until the sun was about to set always making sure to stop and appreciate its calmness. I was grateful for that glimpse into the spirit world so I made sure to absorb every moment of its beauty envisioning all the reunited lovers that had long since left this earth.

By the time I was in the eighth grade life had lost its appeal and it seemed that most days I could only conjure up enough energy to go to school. When I'd return home I would collapse in my bed and sleep away the remains of the day. One night

my mind got the best of me and I tried to commit suicide by gulping down a bottle of Tylenol. I got my stomach pumped at the hospital then they made me drink a disgusting black fluid that they called liquid charcoal.

They kept me in their psychiatric unit and the next morning my mother came to visit me mainly to advise me against telling the psychiatrists how she makes her money. I assured her that I wouldn't speak about that just before begging her to get me out of here. She told me that the doctors would decide when I could go home then she said goodbye and left me there.

My two sisters never came to visit me and my mother didn't bother to bring me a book or anything else that would keep my mind busy. There was nothing to stop the memories of my stupidity from creeping inside my mind and wrapping itself tightly around my heart. Eventually I walked out of my room and got a pen and paper from the nurse's desk then I sat down and started to write,

“The rain falls on my face tonight  
As I walk away from life  
Thunder hammers into the heart  
Thunder hammers into the earth  
And I'm cold  
Wet and cold  
I slide my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket  
The wind blows at me furiously  
I could not stay in the warm shelter of home any longer  
It was not mine  
Love would paint the walls of my home  
That warm shelter isn't my home  
I could not stay there  
This thunderstorm feels much better than that.”

I whispered the words to myself, it helped clear my head of images and thoughts that were best forgotten. Twirling my pen on the desk I breathed deeply, my mind was finally calming down and I was regaining control of myself. I couldn't understand why my big sister always wanted to hurt me, why did she want me to lose my innocence so badly? I moved my poem out of the way of my tears as they fell from my face and hit the desk. Why did God create me? Just to torment me? A really cruel joke is what this is...to be so alive...yet barely exist.

When I met with my psychiatrist he told me that I had a chemical imbalance called bi-polar disorder then he said, "Rama I want you to have a better understanding of what's going on with you, depression is a symptom of an imbalance in the brain's chemistry. It also goes by the name manic depression due to its high's and low's, there will be times when you feel extremely happy and other times you'll feel very sad. At times like this, sad times, you may think that suicide is your only escape but it's not the feeling will pass so you have to stop the impulsive behavior. Maybe you should try to find something else that you like to do besides reading and please don't be afraid to let someone know what's going on with you. The good news is that there is medicine that can help you and if you take them every day you should begin to feel better. How are you feeling about what I've just told you?"

I sat there slumped over with my eyes fixed on the shiny floor, it sounded like a bunch of bullshit from someone who didn't know anything about me. "So this disorder, as you call it, could actually just mean that I see life for what it really is right? That's how I know that my mother doesn't care about me? I'm sure she'd be happy if I never get out of here."

He jumped in, "This is not true Rama she had no choice in the matter you tried to kill yourself. We cannot send you back home after that, not until you get the proper help that you need. Even if your mother begged us to let you go home it was out of her hands, I am sure your mother loves you very much."

I sat up straight wearing an unconvinced look on my face, "If I make myself believe that, if I could lie to myself then I wouldn't have this disorder now would I? If I had a happy family I'd be a happy person and I wouldn't be sitting here now but I'm too honest for that and I can't deny what I can see clearly, I was born to a family that doesn't love me."

He laughed, "Rama you have your entire life ahead of you, you will look back at this one day and feel so grateful to your mother for getting you the help you need and you will love your life again." He wrote out a prescription for anti-depressants as he said, "This will help you feel better not right away but if you take it as prescribed within thirty days your thoughts and emotions should become more stable. If not we'll try a different prescription until we find a medicine that works for you."

I was discharged from the hospital soon after that and returned home just to feel alienated no one greeted me or bothered speaking to me for days. Within that year I'd tried several different medications and none of them made life seem anymore promising. Every time I took a pill nothing changed, it didn't make my mother spend more time with me or make my sisters care about anything other than themselves, it didn't make my loneliness disappear, it didn't work.

Everything seemed to just get worse with time and after I started my freshman year of high school things really went

downhill. I quickly learned that not socializing with others didn't get people to leave me alone it only made them bother me more. Somehow it gave off the impression that I thought I was better than them I guess that would explain why a girl just walked up to me one day and said that she wanted to fight me.

When I asked her why she said, "Because I can't stand stuck up light skin girls who think that they are all that".

I'd never been in a fight before and I had no idea what to do so I didn't do anything besides wrap my arms around her neck and pull her head down. That didn't stop her from breaking my nose, giving me a fat lip and two black eyes. My older sister had to leave school to bring me home since the nurse couldn't get a hold of my mother. When I got there I ran straight to the bathroom barely recognizing myself in the mirror at first until I looked past the swelling bruises.

It took my face about two weeks to completely heal which left me with no choice but to go to school looking that way and as if that wasn't embarrassing enough people began teasing me about it. I ate lunch alone with only one thing on my mind, how to avoid everybody. I'd figured out the safest routes to take to my classes but no matter how elusive I was I always managed to run into someone who pointed and laughed at me.

Later that evening I wound up sitting in my bedroom all alone in the silence of the night. There wasn't anyone who could help me out of this situation and I'd had just about all I could take. Suicide could get me out of this but if my attempt fails I'll be locked up in that hospital again and I didn't want that. I couldn't beat her by myself either she was pretty strong and knew how to fight too well but I had to stand up for myself. I wasn't going to let her or anyone else bully me any

longer, she deserved a good ass whipping and unfortunately I was going to have to be the one to give it to her. I held my hands out in front of me making them into fist in the darkness then I shook my head at my slender fingers they could never do the kind of damage that bitch did to my face.

The next morning I snatched the metal lock off of my locker and slid it into my pocket then I walked slowly through the halls on my way to homeroom. I made sure to look into everyone's face that passed me and when a girl laughed at me I put my hand into my pocket, slid the round metal bar that was attached to the lock around my finger and closed the rest of it in my hand. I gave her a dirty look as a warning but she continued to laugh that's when I pulled my metal fist out and without saying a word smashed it into her face making blood gush from her nose instantly.

That tactic worked well and surprisingly no one ever noticed the huge metal ring around my finger. After doing the same thing to about ten more girls' people were afraid to look in my direction. Every fight got me suspended for a week at a time so I missed a lot of school but I didn't mind and my mother didn't care.

After months of behaving like this everyone at school thought that I was a psychopath that liked to run around punching random people in the face. They left me alone now not daring to look in my direction and although life was still lonely I was safe. It was becoming increasingly harder to keep my thoughts in order even though I'd been reading often so I decided to take that clueless psychiatrist suggestion and find something else I liked to do. I started skateboarding since that was something I'd always wanted to try and it kept my mind focused. I would practice in my driveway every day after

school even though I fell a lot in the beginning I eventually got the hang of it and never fell again.

In time I began feeling like I had good enough control on my board to venture out into town. I would skate in areas other skaters were known to frequent and eventually became friends with another skater named Eric. The day him and his friends picked me up to skate with them was by far the happiest day of my life, I was ecstatic that I'd finally made a few friends. We were a crew that consisted of four guys and a girl and they taught me complicated skate tricks with patience, we clowned around a lot and they didn't judge me.

The Newburgh Skate Park was an hour's bus ride away but we went every Saturday because it was the closest one to us. When we arrived I scanned the park briefly there were only about ten skaters here, some new faces though and one guy in particular was very talkative.

He called himself Comma and throughout the day he kept telling stories about underground parties called raves, he said that kid's partied all night long and got high on shit that I'd never heard of.

I laughed in disbelief when he told me that they actually throw the rave right here at the skate park. "I never even heard of raves before today and they be havin' them right here?"

"Yeah sometimes they throw parties here, they just move all the ramps and shit out," he added pointing to the ramp that we were sitting on.

I scratched my head and squinted one eye as if I didn't understand, "But if it's underground how do people know about it?"

"They hand out flyers, like at this party tonight there's gonna be promoters passin' out flyers to everyone for

upcoming events. The DJ line up on the back of em like Frankie Bones is spinning tonight so you know it's gonna be a dope ass rave," he said while he straightened out his loose skate trucks.

"Word? What are ravers anyway? Like how do they act and shit?" I asked inquisitively.

"Oh ravers are some of the coolest people in the world, we be showin' mad love and respect," he said.

"Nah, skaters are some of the coolest people in the world," I let him know.

"That's funny that you'd say that because a lot of ravers are skaters," on that note he got on his board and skated down the ramp.

His tales about this young, hip culture ignited my curiosity and when he invited us to check out the rave tonight, the rest of the guys turned him down but I happily took him up on his offer. I gave him my address and phone number before we left and he promised to pick me up later that night.

Since my mother was never home I didn't need her permission to go to this mysterious party despite the fact that it wouldn't be over until the early morning. When Comma pulled up in front of my house honking I slipped into my sneakers and yelled for my twin who'd begged me to let her tag along. Ever since my older sister moved into her own apartment my twin had been trying to spend more time with me.

Comma laughed at us playfully insisting that our jeans were too tight but I disagreed. Since I skate I had to wear jeans that didn't constrict my leg movement so my clothes always fit loosely. When we arrived at the rave I was surprised to see such a long line of kids waiting to get inside. We walked

passed them to the back of the line listening to the muffled sounds of techno music that beat through the walls.

The line was moving slowly and while I waited I kept myself entertained by examining the interesting crowd of people. The people in the line ranged from teenage to middle age yet they were all dressed similar, everyone's jeans were two to five sizes too big and the same wideness from top to bottom. They were not hemmed but cut-off right before they reached the ground completely covering their sneakers. Some of their jeans were unraveling at the bottom causing white shreds of material to drag on the ground beneath them. I suddenly felt like Comma was right, my clothes were in fact a bit close fitting and it made me stick out like a sore thumb.

There were people of all colors, shapes and sizes and a lot of them had face piercings the most popular seeming to be the labret, tongue and eyebrow. Some kids pierced the middle of their nose or stretched their ear holes similar to tribal people, which seemed rather fitting since ravers were, in a sense a tribe all their own.

Crayola colored hairstyles, baseball caps and tattoos were all popular amongst them and it seemed as if everyone was either carrying a messenger bag or a backpack. Some girls wore a lot of make-up and some wore none, some girls wore baby tees and visors and some wore super long shirts just like the guys.

People were buying drugs before they even reached the line and everyone seemed to greet one another with a hug. I also noticed that when someone would catch me staring at them they'd give me a welcoming smile and the friendly atmosphere made me feel very comfortable. The line seemed to be moving right along when a girl came walking toward me smiling. She had cute barrettes in her hair and the make-up

that covered her eyes glittered in the streetlights as she held a bag out toward me.

"Hi, would you like a lollidrop," she asked.

"Sure," after I took one she embraced me and that turned out to be my first of many hugs that night.

Comma reached over us and took a few pieces of candy for himself, she hugged him before walking away. Comma threw a piece of candy in his mouth, "She's what's called a candy raver."

I looked at my twin then back at him with raised eyebrows, "Wait, lemme get this straight there are kids that choose to walk around handing out candy and hugs just for the hell of it?"

He nodded yes and that's when I knew that I was in heaven, we finally reached the door and paid twenty dollars each before walking inside the dark place. The music was playing so loud that the bass blew small gust of wind out of the speakers. People were everywhere dancing their hearts out or sitting in groups on the floor chatting and rubbing each other's backs. I looked around in wide eyed fascination, no one was doing the latest dance moves, no one even danced alike for that matter but some dancers were doing different forms of fluidic movements reminiscent of a ribbon blowing in the wind.

I passed ravers that had pacifiers or whistles hanging from their necks and I was a little confused as to why I saw some people wearing surgical mask. When I asked Comma about it he explained that some ravers liked to spread Vicks Vapo Rub inside of them and inhale it while they were on ecstasy because it increased their high. There were also a lot of red balloons being passed around and come to find out they

contained nitrous oxide inside them that people called whip-its.

I'd never heard music quite like this either it was so fast but there was also a deep underlying melody to it that I found hypnotic, it was like food to my hungry ears as I got on the dance floor and ate the beat up. I danced like I'd never danced before closing my eyes and moving my body wherever the rhythm took me. A sense of bliss came over my soul with such intensity that I wanted to cry, I'd finally found a place where I belonged.

## 2.

I was anticipating this upcoming weekend it would be my second rave and I planned on being prepared so I'd been practicing my dance moves to the mixtape Comma had given me. Today was no different as soon as I got back from skateboarding I popped it into the stereo. I needed to come up with a dance style that was all my own, the music was a hundred and forty beats per minute so my body moved to the beat in ways I'd never experienced before. Now all I needed to do was make it look cute because I wasn't going to look out of place this time.

After nearly two hours of dancing I was tired and I heard my mom walk in the front door. I came out of my bedroom and told her that I needed a new wardrobe. She handed me her credit card looking like she did not want to be bothered then I took a cab to the mall.

I got back a few hours later and laid my new clothes across the bed then I grabbed the scissors off of my dresser. Carefully I cut the wide leg jeans so that they stopped precisely at the soles of my sneakers but they still looked brand new. I didn't want to look new, I wanted to look like I'd been raving all my life...that's when the idea hit me and I grabbed my comb off my dresser. I combed the bottom until they were shredded to my satisfaction then I tried them on spreading the excess

material evenly around my belt before standing in front of the mirror. I smiled at my reflection while I pulled on one of my new polo shirts and pretended that I was at a rave. When I did a little dance I realized that my movements appeared more advanced in bigger clothing plus the extra room felt extremely comfortable. Although it was an unexpected feeling the clothes somehow made me feel like a new person. I felt like I was finally in control of my life, like I was making a statement to all the adults in this world that I was free to be me.

On Saturday night Comma pulled up honking and I hopped into his car along with my twin who wanted to tag along once again. When we got there Comma ran into a few of his friends who let us cut them in line so we didn't have to wait too long to get inside. I was excited to be back and the music sounded so good that I headed straight for the dance floor.

Comma told us he'd catch back up with us before disappearing into the crowd. I danced with my twin for a few songs and I could see her watching me from the corners of my eyes. There was no doubt that she impressed with my dancing but she would never give me a compliment she just wasn't that kind of girl. Comma eventually returned walking up to us smiling with his hand out.

I leaned close to his ear, "What's that?"

He took my hand and placed the tiny square piece of paper in my palm before he replied, "Acid, I brought some for you guys."

I didn't know anything about acid and I'd never thought about using drugs before but I was thinking about it now as I examined the paper. It had a tiny picture of Felix the cat on one side and it was smaller than my fingernail. I looked back

at my sister just in time to watch her place the tab on her tongue so with the stroke of my shoulders I did the same.

After about an hour or so I felt the acid beginning to kick in and everyone who walked pass me left a colorful trail behind themselves. Comma said that he had to show my sister where the restrooms were and that they'd be back soon. I nodded and continued dancing but after a while my eyes were envisioning so many melting colors and trails that I couldn't see clearly. Suddenly after blinking a few times every raver in my line of sight looked like they had bugs crawling all over them and snakes slithering around their feet. I looked down at my legs and let out a scream similar to a frightened girl in a horror flick. Frantically I tried to knock the hallucinated creatures off of me and the two guys that were dancing closest to me.

I was smacking his arm when he grabbed my hands and said, "Whoa, what is up with you girl? Are you having a bad trip or sumthin'?"

He was tall and I had to look up at him to see his face as I nodded slowly looking petrified, "I think so, everyone has bugs crawling all over them."

"Hold up, you see bugs on me right now?" He asked moving a little closer.

I could see ants crawling around his eyes and worms moving slowly in his hair I cringed a bit while I spoke nervously, "Yeah, they're all over the place, I'm scared as shit right now."

"Who'd you come with? Where are they?" The taller of the two guys asked me while looking around.

"My sister and my friend but I don't know where they are, I lost them," I explained controlling my urge to runaway but unable to stop looking around at the unbelievable sight. So many bugs were surrounding me while snakes climbed

the walls my eyes were wide with terror as one of the men continued to talk to me.

The tone in his voice was much softer now as he held both my hands and spoke to me, “Alright, I’mma try to help you but you gotta do what I say okay.”

“Okay,” I replied with the nodding of my head.

“Close your eyes and please try not to scream anymore just take deep breaths through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Try to relax because there are no bugs or snakes here, your safe okay that’s all in your head. When you’re on acid you can feel every hair on your skin, every bead of sweat and your mind is not use to the senses being at such a heightened level so it’s making you think that things are crawling on your skin even though they’re not. Nothings on you or anyone else don’t believe your eyes your vision’s not normal right now it will lie to you if you let it but you can control it.” I listened carefully with my eyes shut tight as he kept on, “Okay, now try to think about something you really enjoy and try to imagine it, like is there anything you like to do besides raving?”

I nodded with closed eyes, “Skateboarding.”

He sounded cheerful as he said, “Oh okay we can work with that, don’t open your eyes yet though. Umm, try to picture the last skate video you watched of your favorite skater, aiight? What are you seeing?”

I tried picturing the last video I’d watched at Eric’s house remembering how excited he was that he’d gotten it in the mail and after a while I felt myself begin to calm down a bit, my eyes were still shut as I told him, “Harold Hunter, that’s who I see and he’s doing crazy tricks on his board as always.”

He let out a little laugh, “Word? Yo, Zoo York’s my squad, that dude’s awesome.”

"Yeah, I gotta rep for the east coast and he's like my inspiration ya know," it felt good to talk to someone who knew about skating.

"Word, I saw him at a rave in the city last weekend he's mad cool." He laughed a bit before he added, "He's funny as hell too, he gots mad jokes." Then he and spoke with surprise, "You skate?"

"Hell yeah," I told him. "Do you?"

"I use to, but yo I never met a girl skater before, that's dope," he complimented before asking. "Do you feel a little better yet?"

"Yeah but I'm still scared to open my eyes," I explained sounding on edge.

"Then don't, well not until you feel okay with it. What's your name anyways?" He asked me keeping his voice gentle.

"Rama, this is my second rave," I let him know.

He let out a soft chuckle, "Word? Well I'm Chris and even though you can't see nuthin' right now, this dude right here is Shane."

Shane budded in, "What's up Rama? Besides the bad trip how do you like it?"

I smiled at the thought, "I love it, it's like another planet."

"Wait is this the first time you ever dropped acid?" Chris asked me inquisitively.

"Yeah," I told him.

Chris laughed, "It's a little too late now but the number one rule—."

They both spoke at the same time, "Never drop acid for the first time in a public place."

Only Chris spoke now, "Those two things do not mix just like—." He cut himself off when a girl asked him a question but I still did not open my eyes. I listened to their conversation

though, she asked him if he had any k'. He told her yes, that he had twenties and after that some sort of exchange went down. He must have turned his attention right back to me because he picked his words right back up, "Yeah that shit don't mix like me and candy ravers yo."

That's when I laughed pretty hard and before I realized it my eyes had popped open, I was relieved when I saw that everything looked normal again. I looked up at the two tall strangers that helped me I could see their handsome faces clearly now they looked to be in their early twenties. I felt eternally grateful to them for taking the time to talk me out of my bad trip and they seemed genuinely happy that I came out of it alright. I still had no idea where Comma or my sister was so I hung with them for the rest of the night.

When the party was ending my sister and Comma just so happened to walk by us and it was clear that they were tripping out. They seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely laughing and acting a fool, they didn't even notice me until I tapped my sisters' shoulder. I asked where they'd disappeared to and they claimed to have been searching for me all night but they couldn't seem to stop giggled. I introduced them to Chris and Shane before getting their numbers then I hugged them goodbye and we parted ways.

I collapsed into my bed when we got back home feeling exhausted and completely refreshed at the same time like life suddenly had meaning. Thanks to this new world I'd discovered I didn't feel lost or out of place anymore and for the first time I knew exactly what I wanted in life...to be a raver. I felt like I belonged there it was a great escape from my screwed up life and nothing else mattered to me anymore besides making sure I went to one every weekend.

I'd only been asleep for about three hours when my friends stopped by to pick me up, I'd forgotten all about skating that day but I grabbed my board and headed out like I always did. We decided to skate in an empty parking lot and after an hour or so I decided to take a break. I sat down beside Eric, he'd been sitting on his board ever since we'd got here and that wasn't like him. I used my hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun so I could get a good look at his face, he was upset about something so I asked, "What's up witchu today?"

He looked over at me and smiled, "Nuthin' really 'cept my moms grounded me yesterday. I gotta be in the house by 7pm every fuckin' night for an entire month."

I raised my eyebrows, "Damn what you do?"

He sucked his teeth, "Stayed out all night."

"That shit sucks," I added picking up a twig then tossing it back on the pavement.

He began tightening his shoelace as he asked, "You went out with that guy we met at the skate park again?"

"Yup yup, that shit was butters too, I'mma make sure I go every weekend," I told him with a hint of excitement in my voice.

He let out a tired giggled, "See my mom is too fuckin' strict, I wish I had your moms she lets you do whatever."

"Nah that's not necessarily a good thing," I added as my eyes searched the ground for another twig to throw.

"So what are you like a raver now?" He asked in a way that made me feel like a deserter.

I answered honestly, "Yeah, I guess."

He smirked at me, "Pretty soon you'll stop skating too."

I frowned my face, "Nah, never that."

The rest of the guys had gathered some trash into a small pile that they lit on fire and as they ollied over it we looked on

laughing. After a few moments Eric continued, “Man, I seen it happen to plenty skaters Rama. They start going to raves and don’t have time for skating no more they’re too busy liquid dancing and shit.” We both laughed before he added, “Just don’t end up all strung out on drugs and shit, I seen that happen to plenty ravers too.”

I sucked my teeth at that as I rocked my board slowly back and forth underneath me, “Nah fuck that shit, that’ll never happen.” He didn’t look convinced though and I have to admit that his concern took me by surprise.

As time went by raving did become more of a priority and skateboarding faded into the background just like Eric told me it would. I started going to parties on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays staying up all night and sleeping all day. Whenever Eric would knock on my door I’d always tell him that I was too tired to skate and after awhile he eventually stopped coming to get me.

I’d become really good friends with Chris and Shane and started staying at their apartment in New York City most weekends. Since I lived about 200 miles away I’d usually take the bus into the city and they’d pick me up from there. There were times when I wouldn’t return home until the middle of the week but my mother was too absorbed in her own life to care.

One night I met a girl named Johanna at a rave and upon getting to know her discovered that we attended the same high school yet I’d never noticed her until that night. From that moment on we were inseparable we even went to the salon together she had her hair dyed a lighter blonde than it already was while I dyed my hair a bright red. We’d both gotten permission from our mothers to get our tongues

pierced and Johanna's friend Julia drove us there since she was getting a tattoo.

I watched her getting stuck with that needle over and over again and her constant whining made it seem pretty uncomfortable. When it was our turn to get pierced Johanna wanted to go first and seeing how much pain she was in made me have a sudden change of heart. Even though Johanna could barely talk we still laughed about it while she sat ice cubes on her swollen tongue.

I'd go back and forth from Johanna's to Chris and Shane's place, I wanted to spend the least amount of time at home that I possibly could but even with the change of environment one thing always remained the same. Drugs were always around rather they were being used or measured out and bagged up for resale, there seemed to be no avoiding it.

One day my mother called me into her room and asked me a few questions about the rave scene, I immediately became nervous. What if my behavior hadn't gone unnoticed after all? Did she actually care about what I was out there doing? She asked me if people got high at these raves and when I cautiously nodded yes and reassured her that I did not partake in those activities she asked me another question, if I thought I could make a profit selling coke there. I couldn't believe my ears as I relaxed and listened carefully to her explain herself, she said that I could keep all the profit and this way she wouldn't have to worry about giving us allowance.

I interrupted her, "What do you mean by "us"?"

She laughed, "Well theirs one condition, you have to work together with your twin because you can have each other's back if someone tries to rob ya'll and that way she can make her allowance money too."

I agreed to it, "Fine she's always tagging along anyways and you really ain't gotta worry about us getting robbed, a rave's probably the safest place on earth to sell drugs at."

After a few months of selling blow I had a lot of extra cash to spend and I was spending it all on partying. I made new friends this way too but unfortunately my twin wasn't having the same luck. People were complaining that she put too much cut in her product and were refusing to buy from her. She started to become jealous of my success and her personality gradually began to change.

A year had come and gone just like that and I found myself doing more coke than I was getting rid of despite the fact that I hated the comedown, it was free so I couldn't resist. One night I was coming down off of a two day binge and climbed out of my bedroom window to sit on the roof. All I wanted to do was jump to my death but I didn't, only because I knew that it wasn't a far enough distance. That night I decided that coke was more trouble than it was worth and stopped doing it so heavily. But in the back of my mind I knew that there was a perfect drug out there for me I just hadn't found it yet.

My sixteenth birthday fell on a Saturday and Chris, Shane and Tara drove upstate to pick me up then we went to "Caffeine" on Long Island. The party was packed with tons of familiar faces and every drug imaginable was in circulation. Most of my friends had already been doing meth but it was one of the few drugs that I hadn't tried. I'd always refused until tonight when they surprised me with a twenty bag as a birthday present, how could I say no. At that rave, on my sixteenth birthday I discovered the drug that I'd been searching for, the one above all the rest, crystal meth.

### 3.

I wanted to improve my relationship with my older sister so I offered to babysit for her one night when she was in need. As soon as I got to her place she ran down a few instructions before leaving out with her friends. After about an hour of rocking back and forth singing lullaby's to my nephew he fell asleep. I pushed myself up from the couch slowly not wanting to wake him and placed him gently in his crib. He looked so precious and peaceful while he slept, I couldn't help but wonder how life would be for him growing up in this crazy dysfunctional family.

I dimmed the lights on my way back into the living room then grabbed the remote, plopped on the couch and flipped through the channels. My favorite movie "A Streetcar Named Desire" was on so I grabbed a box of crackers, wrapped myself in a blanket and watched the young Marlon Brando in action.

I must have fallen asleep somewhere in the middle of the movie but something unexpected woke me back up. Cold metal pushed into the side of my face and a tall, overweight man leaning over me but I was too afraid to scream or do anything other than what I was told to do.

I locked the door as soon as he ran back out of it then I ran myself the hottest bath my body could handle. Suds were splashing everywhere as I scrubbed my skin vigorously,

I needed to wash off this scent it was making me nauseous and dizzy. I couldn't get clean and the water was cooling off, I turned the faucet back on but the hot water had run cold and I was still dirty...I was still dirty. Once my arms were too tired to scrub any longer I snatched the hot pink razor off the side of the tub and bent it until it cracked apart. The tips of my teeth grabbed the razor and pulled it out it cut deep into my lip but there was no pain and I didn't cut my wrist slow I did it as quick as I possibly could, it was time to go. I relaxed my head against the tiled wall and allowed the cooled scarlet water to surround me along with the darkness until I could see nothing else.

My eyes forced themselves open as I lay there I didn't turn my head or try to speak I just lay there staring at the white ceiling and pale blue walls for hours. Listening to the sounds of the different machines beeping their loud and soft harmonies, the doctors being paged and the constant walking back and forth pass my door while I wondered just how close I'd gotten to dying. There were nurses at their station talking to each other about family life and it sliced my sadness wide open. Reminding me of just how un-normal my life was, one nurse said that she needed to leave early to pick up her son from soccer practice the other promised to she'd try her recipe for dinner tonight. Why couldn't God had given me an amazing life like that? Why couldn't we sit down for dinner together and go to soccer games? My thoughts were interrupted by an older woman walking into my room and telling me that she was here to take my blood pressure.

I grabbed my hospital gown and pulled it tighter around me as I pushed myself up making myself smile out of politeness. When she went away I fished through the bag she'd left behind for me but the bright white gauze wrapped around both my

wrist and the I.V. needle sticking out of my arm diverted my attention. I examined them, and when I turned my wrist over there were dried brown stains where fresh blood once was. I looked away not wanting to remember anything from last night pulling the bag closer to my face and fishing through the papers. There were plenty forms and pamphlets, a toothbrush, soap and a pen. I bit down lightly on the pen cap pulling it off as I flipped the pamphlet over to the blank side and began to write.

“When Love is first introduced it is beautiful and pure  
Like a force field that cannot be penetrated  
No one can touch it  
It has the power to mend broken souls  
So perfect it is  
But  
It can manifest itself into something much darker  
Something that posses the ability to destroy you  
To pick your soul apart piece by piece  
Feeding it to the flames  
Until you are defeated  
Reduced to mere ashes  
That blow away with the slightest breath  
Yes  
It changes just as an apple  
A beautifully ripe crimson apple that’s so tempting  
To sink your teeth into  
And when you do the juices overflow  
So much so that at times the mouth cannot contain it all  
Some may drip from the corners of your lips and run down  
your chin  
It is ever so tasty

Yet that same paradisiacal fruit  
Falls from the tree  
Rots on the ground  
And  
Becomes a dwelling  
For larvae  
This  
Is  
Love.”

This time around they actually let me out even quicker but they made me promise to take my medication every day. I said that I would just as I had the last time but I never took one pill after they set me free, I never even got the prescription filled. At this point I felt like I'd heard it all before another psychiatrist telling me that they cared about me and that they wanted me to get better but it's all lies they don't even know me.

No sooner than I got back home I was at a rave where I ran into to Chris and Shane. I hung with them but I didn't feel the need to enlighten them about my whereabouts for the past week, I never told anyone about my visits to the psychiatric unit. If I were to tell someone they'd probably just write me off as crazy and stop hanging around me, who wants to be in the company of a psycho.

Once Chris and Shane moved to Brooklyn I stopped going over to their place as often instead I'd meet up with them in the city on Fridays. We decided to go to “Culture” at The Velvet tonight and while I was on the dance floor I met a girl named Leah. I actually thought she was a boy at first sight but when she released the mop of curls she'd been hiding underneath her hoody her beauty couldn't be denied. We

hung out with her and her friends all night and by the time the party ended we were dating, it wasn't something that I'd even thought twice about it just felt right. She preferred to keep her long onyx locks slicked back in a tight bun and although she was half black and half white her complexion was darker than mine.

I had plans to meet up with Leah at a rave in Queens that following weekend and as I headed out the front door my twin called after me begging to tag along. I wanted to say no so that she wouldn't find out that I was dating a girl but I never cared what anyone else thought of me before so why should I start now.

Leah showed up rather late hugging and kissing all over me every chance she got, it was obvious that my twin didn't approve of our relationship because she spent the rest of the night avoided us. She didn't say one word to me on the bus ride back home either and eventually she stopped speaking to me all together which I thought was a bit weird since our own mother was gay.

I dated Leah for about three months sometimes staying in the Bronx at her place for weeks at a time. I enjoyed her companionship but I already knew that I could never fall in love with her she liked to show off too much and she lied often. That was typical human behavior in my eyes and my heart could never fall for typical now someone who was honest and kept it real that was truly something rare that I had yet to see.

Leah made a living selling meth and not just any meth "pink champagne", it had a pink tint to its rich white color and was truly the champagne of all meth. She was in high demand with her beeper going off non-stop and her constant running back and forth in and out the door. She usually left me in the

company of her closest friends Lauren, Eddie and Jie, they'd brought a few e' pills with them today so we'd decided to candyflip. I pulled a couple baggies of blow out my pocket and sat them on the table, "Ya'll want some yay-yo with it?"

Eddie looked at me with big eyes, "Nah uh girl, that kills the ex effect."

They laughed as I slid my baggies back into my pocket and said, "Word? I did not know that shit, so that's why my e' don't kick in half the time? Wow and all this time I was thinking that my e's were duds and shit." I pulled two baggies of crystal out of my other pocket and slammed it on the table, "Bam."

Lauren laughed, "Yeah, now this goes with ex's perfectly."

They continued to laugh and tell horror stories about candyflipping with the wrong drugs but my thoughts were someplace else. Lately I'd noticed that Leah was disappearing more often than usual and it had been bothering me. I gave my watch a quick glance then looked at Lauren, "Yo, Leah's been disappearing more and more lately don't you think?"

They all exchanged strange looks amongst each other before Jie finally said, "Rama we really like you and we just feel bad lying to you all the time."

"Lying about what?" I asked feeling clueless.

"Leah's been cheating on you with some chick that goes to Juilliard," Eddie blurted out. "I told her that she needs to keep it real with you because your mad cool and you don't deserve that." He threw his hands up in an emotional gesture, "I told her that I really didn't appreciate being put in such a fucked up position."

Lauren agreed as she added, "We had already decided if she dipped off with that girl one more time we were going to tell you."

"Now she's gonna kick our ass but fuck it," Jie added as he crossed his legs and sat up straight.

I laughed, "No she won't as a matter of fact this convo never even happened, I'm just gonna break up with her she doesn't need to know the real reason why." I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed, "Damn now I feel like all betrayed and shit."

Jie thought he heard someone walking up the steps of building and tip toed over to the door. He leaned the side of his face against it before suddenly getting very nervous, "Oh shit here she comes, oh shit."

I laughed at his fear, it was funny. When Leah walked in she took a seat beside me and looked around uncomfortably then she asked me, "What are you laughing about?"

I stopped giggling and cleared my throat, "Nothing, I was just thinking about something."

"What?" She lit herself a cigarette and tossed the box onto the oak coffee table that sat in front of us.

That made me want one so I grabbed a stogey out of her pack and lit it while saying, "I don't wanna be with you no more."

She made a sad face, as if her feelings were hurt, "What, what type of shit is that how you just gonna say some shit like that? Wait, so you're breaking up with me?"

I brought my eyebrows together, "Yeah, but we can still be friends. I mean c'mon now Leah, you can't have your cake and eat it too."

She cut me off angrily, "What the fuck is that suppose to mean?" Leah looked at everyone's faces as if she knew they'd told me about her little secret then with the shake of her head she said, "Nah, you're not breaking up with me yo. You're still my girl, I don't give a fuck."

I laughed again, "Please Leah, now you wanna act like you care all of a sudden? You been dippin' off every chance you get, if you wanted to be with me you'd try to spend a little more time with me. I spend way more time with your friends than I do with you."

Lauren stood up and interrupted us, "Umm, I have to go to work now so I'll see you guys later."

I hopped up and slid the straps of my back pack onto my shoulders, "Hold up, I'mma walk with you cuz I'm headed over that way."

Leah looked up at me flinching from the smoke that floated passed her eyes, "Where is you going?"

"Slow ya roll, I said we not together no more so you don't get to ask me questions like that." I rolled my eyes at her as Lauren and I walked out the front door while Leah yelled behind us, "I better not see you with nobody else Rama, you're still my girl."

Without looking back I held my hand up and acted as if I were shooing away a fly. Once we were out of her sight Lauren must have felt that it was safe to laugh 'cause she did and so did I, "I'm really happy you guys told me, how dare she even act like that when she got another chick on the side."

"I know right, that was some funny shit," Lauren added.

"Yes it truly was and I'm surprised that I'm not more upset than this," I explained as we entered the subway.

When we reached Lauren's job I gave her a hug goodbye, "You going to "Culture" tonight?"

"Yeah, right after work, you still going?" She asked looking unsure.

"Hells yeah that's my spot," we giggled as she pulled the markets glass door open. "See ya later," I said watching her walk inside then I continued on to Matt's crib.

When I entered St. Mark's Village it looked like a scene from a movie, the way the punks were running around with their funky colored mohawks sticking high in the air, wearing Doc Martin's and sporting tattoos. When I reached Matt's apartment he was already standing outside conversing with some guys that I didn't recognize.

"What's up Mattie?" I asked and at the sound of my voice he turned to look at me.

"What's up Rama," he said hugging me tight.

He was on his way to Union Square Park with his friend so I walked along with them. When we got there a group of people were waiting for them they weren't ravers though just some kids hanging out. After socializing for a bit Matt suggested that we go sit on a bench away from all of them since they were being really loud and I could barely hear any of the words that were coming out of his mouth. I agreed and after we found a secluded bench he managed to ruin my goodtime by unexpectedly leaning in for a kiss. I let out a shocked hiccup while I backed away from his pouted lips and pushed him back softly. He looked embarrassed so I chose my words carefully, "Matt I thought we were friends."

He glued his eyes to the ground almost immediately and spoke hesitantly, "W—we are, but I dunno, I mean am I the type of guy you'd like want for a boyfriend?"

I studied his thin frame, his short bleached blonde hair and his pretty blue eyes but I was not attracted to him. He was kinda too old for me anyway so I cleared my throat before saying, "Refresh my memory, how old are you again?"

"Twenty five," he said in a cautious way.

That was my scapegoat so I ran with it, "Umm don't you think you're a little too old for me?"

"Yeah, n—no sorry about that, yeah we're friends this blunt got me zoned that's all," he held the halfway smoked blunt up as if that made his answer more believable.

"Oh yeah I forgot you're a light weight," I joked trying to help his excuse out a bit, it was probably a combination of him being such a nice guy and my ecstasial state but never the less I felt really bad turning him down.

We dropped that topic soon enough and headed out of the park I spotted Jie and Eddie hanging by the subway entrance and sped up to greet them. After we hugged I introduced my friends to each other, "This is Matt, Matt this is Jie and Eddie."

They greeted one another before Jie said, "You guys on your way to "Culture"?"

"Yup yup you know it," I answered before looking over at Matt. "You coming with me right?"

He nodded, "Yeah but I gotta leave early, I got work in the morning."

"That's cool." I let him know before saying to all of them, "Well c'mon let's go."

When we got there Leah and Lauren were standing outside Leah caught sight of us and offered me a big smile while she walked toward us saying, "Damn Rama it's like that, you really gonna come to my club with your new boyfriend?"

I laughed, "He's not my boyfriend Leah and this ain't ya club." I looked over at Matt, "This is my friend Matt."

"Oh, what's up Matt, did Rama tell you that she broke up with me today?" She asked him.

He shook his head smiling, "No."

"It's all good tho'," she walked closer to me and held her arms out for a hug. "You're still my girl regardless."

I hugged her tightly, "Whatever Leah, chill the fuck out and let's get fucked up."

"Already got that taken care of," she said as she pulled a few pills out of her pocket. "Yo, I gots mad of these," she handed an e' pill to each of us but when she got to Matt he shook his head.

"No thanks," he added with a smile.

Leah laughed, "Is you even a raver cuz I never seen you before?"

I took over for him, "He been ravin' longer than you for your information and maybe you ain't know but all ravers don't get high Leah. Ravers get high off the music first and foremost ya hurd?"

Matt agreed and she complimented him, "Nah but for real that's mad cool cuz I damn sure need to stop fuckin with all this shit too yo. Accept for one thing," she held out one finger. "There's nothing on earth better than dancing on e'." She tilted her head to the side as if she just had an epiphany, "Except fuckin' on e'."

That night was the last time that "Culture" was thrown at The Velvet, it was also the last night that Jie, Eddie, Leah, Lauren and I were all together.

Ever since I'd broken up with Leah I found myself at home more often and my twin didn't ask to tag along anymore. She was still running around here doing the exact same thing as me, getting high, going to raves and selling coke too but we weren't speaking to each other at all. We kept separate circles of friends and I frequented different parties. I traveled to raves down toward the city while she went to the ones further upstate like Rochester, I even saw flyers lying around from a rave she'd been to in Boston.

Tonight a rave was being thrown at the Newburgh Skate Park again and after a nice dinner at Johanna's house her mother let her use the car and we headed over there. Our

excitement was boiling once we saw how many people came out, we drove around circling the building slowly in search of a place to park that's when I noticed my twin. She was leaned against a car talking to a group of people and her eyes rolled toward our car as we crept past. The moment she caught sight of me she gave me a dirty look like she didn't even know me. I was a little taken back by her coldness but if she wanted to treat me like a stranger two could play that game.

After Johanna found a place to park we had to walk past her to get to the line but I acted as if I didn't see her while I called out to a friend of mine that I'd just spotted.

There was such a big turnout that I managed to not see her for the rest of the night. Some mutual friends of ours told me that she had gotten upset with them for buying their coke off of me. I didn't intend to take all her sales but I guess it made her pretty upset because when I got home that morning my mother greeted me at the front door.

She spoke with fury in her eyes, "Rama, your sister told me everything."

I tried to walk past her but she stood in my way and yanked my arm pulling me closer to her while she dug into my pocket. My heart started pounding through my chest when she pulled out a small red baggy that still had special k in it and a tiny red mescaline pill I'd forgotten all about. I sucked my teeth, "Okay, that was a twenty of coke that spilled out in my pocket so I couldn't sell it and that's a piece of candy, I—I had some candy earlier."

She ignored me and moved on to my left pocket pulling a small clear baggy out that still had a little crystal residue in it. She held it in my face and I rolled my eyes but she looked different now, her eyes had turned distant and it seemed as if she didn't know me anymore. She spoke through tight

lips, "I know none of this has to do with the coke your selling because those baggies are green not red or clear so don't even try using that for an excuse. Are you using all of these drugs Ramia?"

I hung my head down, I was busted and there was nothing I could say that would get me out of this shit. I looked over at my sister sitting there on the coach dressed like the raver that she wasn't. She had always been just a kid that likes to go to raves but she was never truly a raver, wearing that fake look of concern so well. When she glanced my way I rolled my eyes at her with disgust then I walked away from the both of them straight down the hall to my bedroom and slammed the door behind me. I immediately began pacing back and forth trying to wrap my mind around what the fuck had just happened. I'd never prepared myself for this, I mean I always just assumed that my sister would never tell on me because I could tell my mother what she was doing just the same. She played it smart though she knew that if she did it this way my words would hold no weight.

My mother was yelling threats of all kinds through my door and she kept saying that she was going to send me to rehab as soon as she got back from work. Warning me that if I wasn't willing to go away and get help I better be prepared to leave and never step foot back in her house again. When her voice got lower I placed my ear to the door and heard her giving my twin orders not to let me use the phone then she told her that she'd already called the rehab and she'd be bringing me there as soon as she got back.

I heard her car keys jingling for a few more moments then she left out the front door and tears rolled down my face. I wiped them away quickly as my sister popped back into my head and I whispered, "What a little bitch." I sank onto my

bed staring blankly while fleeting thoughts ran through my mind, images of all the bad things in my life that I'd worked so hard at burying deep inside of me. All the pain I'd suffered at the hands of my own family now my mother's trying to stop me from going to raves, the only escape that I have from this madness. If she doesn't want me here I'll just leave, I'd rather live on the streets then be locked up in some rehab. Fuck rehab, fuck hospitals, fuck this wack ass town, fuck all this shit I'mma be in control of my own life.

I sat up, grabbed my backpack and started stuffing clothes into it until it was full then I opened my messenger bag and crammed some more necessities in there. I slid my window up quietly and tossed both bags out before carefully climbing onto the roof. It slanted pretty low in the front so I slid my body off and hung there letting my feet dangle for a moment. I prayed that it wasn't too far of a fall then feeling my arms getting weaker I let go and dropped straight down placing my arms out in front of me. I landed softly onto the lawn then wiped the dirt and grass off my clothes with my hands while I took a few deep breaths. My nerves were a bit jumpy but I prepared myself for the long walk I had ahead of me, tossed both bags over my shoulders and started walking.

My eyes watched every car that drove by and my mind kept trying to picture my mother's face whenever she discovered that I was gone but I doubt that she'd even care. She'd just use this as confirmation of what she'd already been thinking, that I was nothing more than a strung out drug addict.

I had to walk through two small towns before finally reaching Johanna's house and I wasn't sure what to expect when I got there. For all I knew my mother could already be there waiting for me I took a deep breath and knocked on her door. After a few uneasy minutes the door opened slowly and

Johanna appeared on the other side yawning and stretching as she motioned for me to come in. I looked up and down her quiet road before going inside and locking the door behind me.

We went to her bedroom and closed the door as I explained everything to her in a low voice. Johanna lit me a cigarette then lit one for herself while she listened carefully and when I finished she asked, “Wait, why would your sister do that to you?”

I hung my head, “I really don’t know. She just hates me I honestly think my family wishes that I was never born, like my mom basically told me to leave. I wish I had your mom, she loves you so much and she’s just the nicest, coolest lady I’ve ever met.”

“Shit, I wish you could just stay here, let’s just ask my mom and see,” Johanna suggested.

“Nah, I would feel bad making her have to go to court and argue with my moms and shit just because of me. Besides I don’t want them to know where I am,” I told her shaking my head sadly.

She got up and grabbed her phone off the dresser handing it to me before laying across her bed. She spoke with her cigarette hanging from the side of her mouth, “My mom would do that shit, no prob’.” I still shook my head no then she pointed to my bags with a sigh, “I hope you packed your phonebook? We need to start calling people.”

I pulled my little booklet out of my bag and started dialing Chris and Shane’s number while Johanna stared in awe at my new Liquidsky astrogirl sticker I’d stuck on the cover.

Shane picked up after the third ring sounding like I’d woken him. “Hello,” he said dryly.

I told him what happened and I could hear Chris being nosy in the background and I waited while Shane repeated everything back to him. I heard Chris tell him that I could stay with them but when Shane got back to me that wasn't what he said.

"Yo, I don't want you to be mad at me Rama but that wouldn't be smart because I'm twenty three and Chris is twenty one you are only sixteen. That just won't look right when the police come and they will come cuz your sister's been here before so she knows exactly where we live. Your best bet is to just go back home—."

I cut him off offended, "Almost everyone I know still lives with their parents and I don't wanna call Leah. But whatever Shane I get it, you don't wanna get into any trouble, I'll just ask someone else. I know one thing though, I ain't bouta go back home." We shared a moment of silence before I said, "I gotta go."

He cleared his throat, "If you end up in the city you can come through whenever, the doors always open."

"Yeah, okay thanks," I said sadly. "I'll talk to you later, bye." I looked at Johanna and shook my head while I dialed Matt's number. Pulling my knees up to my chest and resting my forehead on them as I listened to his phone ringing unsure of what plan b was going to be if everyone I ask tells me no.

When Matt answered I was happy that he seemed to be wide awake and I spoke in a flirtatious mumble, "Hey Matt, it's Rama watcha doin'?"

"Nothing, bouta go to work, why what's up with you? You coming to the city today?" He asked curiously.

I explained everything to him then he told me to hold on while he asked his roommate. After a few minutes he got back on the phone and I asked anxiously, "What did Jeremy say?"

"He said no, I should have lied about your age because at first he said it was cool then he said "she's eighteen right?" I told him no, that you were sixteen and then he changed his mind. I'm sorry, if it was up to me you know I'd say yeah."

"It's all good Matt at least you tried," as I spoke the words I couldn't help but wonder, if I'd said yes to him that night would he had fought a little harder for me today. I let out a deep breath, "Well I gotta keep calling people."

He coughed a few times before he said, "Alright, I get off work at ten tonight so make sure you call me after that and I hope everything works out, make sure you call me okay."

"Kay," I said sadly then I slammed the phone down and looked up at Johanna who was still lying on her bed watching me. I shook my head in dismay then I ran my finger down a row of phone numbers in my book. "Lauren, lemme call her," I said tapping the page a few times before I picked up the phone and started pushing buttons.

"You think she'll let you crash there?" Johanna asked.

I shrugged my shoulders and held the phone to my ears, "She has roommates too so who knows."

When Lauren answered she told me that she had to be to work soon but she had a little time to hear me out. I told her what was going on and she sounded like she genuinely wanted to help, "Well I have to ask my roommates but I think it'll be fine, they are never home most of the time anyway. I have their work numbers so I'll ask them now before and I'll call you back in a few."

"Okay," I told her sadly.

"Rama, if they say no I'll help you find somewhere to live, you can at least crash here for a day or two," she assured me before she hung up.

I felt better after she said that, I never expected her to be so nice I thought that she was probably too grown up to deal with my teenage bullshit. She actually reminded me of my mother to a certain extent I mean Lauren was Irish and had a bunch of tattoos and a lip piercing but they were both butch and they both kept their hair short. I felt like I could trust her even though she was friends with my ex-girlfriend they'd recently had a falling out and although I didn't know all the details behind it that meant that I didn't have to worry about Leah knowing my business. We waited impatiently for her call afraid that my mother would pop up with the police at any moment.

When She finally called back I was relieved to hear her say yes that was followed by a speech about how I'd have to get a job and be responsible I assured her that I would and thanked her over and over again. Johanna's mother dropped us off at the bus station after we'd told her that we were going to visit some out of town friends. Then I purchased a one way ticket for myself and a round trip ticket for Johanna since she had to be back for work in the morning.

We rode the bus for a few hours before finally arriving in New York City then we walked to the Greenwich Village where Lauren was working. The weather was warm that night and the breeze felt liberating against my skin when we approached the market I could see Lauren through the glass window standing at her cash register. She was busy helping customers as I pointed her out to Johanna since they'd never met each other before. We hung outside smoking cigarettes and reminiscing while we waited for her shift to end.

I took a drag of my cigarette, "Do you remember when I threw up on all those people at that rave in Yonkers?"

Just the thought of it made us laugh so hard that a tear ran down my face, Johanna stood on her tippy toes attempting to reenact my behavior that night, "Oh yeah, Umm wasn't that party called "Pegasus"? Remember you kept sayin' where's my horse at cuz I'm 'bouta ride out." Then she pretended to vomit, "Yo I'm glad you turned away from me cuz that shit got on everybody who was chillin' in that corner behind us." She covered her mouth as she coughed and laughed at the same time.

Eventually I stopped laughing catching my breath before adding, "Nah, but I was fucked up and the shit was at a raceway so I was thinking that I owned horses and shit." I explained to her while turning my head toward the market door as it opened.

Lauren came walking out, her wallet chain jingling softly as she approached us rocking a huge smile. I noticed that she'd dyed her hair blue, it was pink the last time I'd seen her and she'd also put a bigger gage in her eyebrow. She gave me a big hug before I introduced her to Johanna they greeted each other with a hug as well.

"You coming back to chill with us?" Lauren asked her with excitement in her voice.

"I actually gotta get back cuz I got work in the morning," Johanna explained.

"Do you mind if we walk her back to The Port Authority?" I asked Lauren as we all started walking slowly away from the market. Lauren nodded in agreement and Johanna and I shared some more funny rave stories with her along the way. When we got there her bus was already boarding, I gave my best friend a tight, grateful hug goodbye before going our separate ways.

Lauren and I rode the subway back to her place and when we walked inside my first thought was that it was the smallest three bedroom apartment I'd ever seen. The living room was attached to the kitchen and the bathroom was next to the front door they had two very friendly cats too. I was prepared to meet her roommate's but they weren't home yet and I found myself wondering what they'd think of me. Lauren sat my two bags in the corner of her room then she made the couch comfy for me layering it with blankets and pillows.

I sat at the kitchen table watching her for a moment, "Thanks Lauren, this really means a lot to me."

She turned to look at me, "No doubt."

"I promise I'll start looking for work in the morning," I assured her.

She stretched her arms out as she yawned, "Oh, I talked to my boss and he wants you to fill out an application tomorrow."

"Hell yeah that'll be so dope," I told her happily. We eventually said goodnight to one another and I lay on her couch, in the darkness full of fear and excitement. It had been a long day and I wasn't sure of anything anymore except that I would never go home again no matter what, I never wanted to see my family again.

## 4.

When I awoke that morning the apartment was still asleep so I crept into Laurens room and grabbed my bag then I locked myself in the bathroom. I pressed my palms into the porcelain sink and looked at myself in the mirror but I didn't turn on the light the sun provided plenty while it climbed the sky. The incandescence of the golden sun reflected against my skin as I brushed my teeth then I stepped inside the shower. The warm water splashed on my face and I imagined it washing what remained of my old life down the drain. It was the summer of 1995, I was sixteen and ready to start my new life with nobody telling me what I could and couldn't do.

Lauren and her roommates were all gathered in the kitchen when I came back out the bathroom. One of her roommates was a dark—complexioned guy in his mid-thirties, he was really tall and muscular yet soft spoken the other was a perky looking white girl and I greeted them both with a smile.

"Hello Rama, I'm Tyrone." He shook my hand before asking, "Want a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, thank you," I replied and took the steaming mug from him. I took a seat at the kitchen table next to her other roommate and blew my cup.

"Hey, I'm Shana nice to meet you," she said grinning as she got up and placed her empty cereal bowl on the counter then she headed into the bathroom.

I sipped my hot drink as I watched Lauren fix two plates of scrambled eggs and toast. She sat one of them in front of me, "Oh thanks."

Lauren took a seat across from me and we ate our breakfast quietly while we watched the news. After she'd finished her eggs she asked, "You wanna go apply at my job today?"

"Uh-huh," I told her as I got up and put my plate in the sink. I waited for Lauren to get ready then we headed out the door. My eyes flinched at the morning sunshine as we stopped at the bodega and she brought me a pack of cigarettes and a bag of Dipsey Doodles I thanked her for that. I had to admit I was impressed that she remembered what brand of cigarettes I smoked and how much I loved these chips.

When we got to her job I could tell everyone really liked her there including her boss because he hardly looked at my application. He asked Lauren if she thought that I'd be a hard worker and as soon as she said yes he asked me if I could start tomorrow. We left the market and headed to the park in search of a celebratory blunt and while we stood by the entrance searching for a familiar face I spotted Jie and Eddie. They were sitting by the fountain running their mouths as usual I tapped Laurens shoulder and pointed them out then we hurried over to them, "Hey ya'll." I said happily while we all took turns with hugs.

I took a seat beside Jie and he asked, "Are you guys going to check out that new shit Tom Mello's throwing at the The Roxy on Friday nights?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Since "Culture" ended I gots a open spot so I guess so."

Lauren gave me a quick frown before adding, “I’mma miss that shit, that’s where we all met, that was our hang out spot.”

Eddie adjusted his sun glasses, “I know right, I met everybody there. Well except Lauren we met at the gay and lesbian community center.”

Jie laughed, “Oh my god, yo you guys use to be chillin’ there hardcore.”

“Then we found raves,” Lauren added.

Jie looked at me, “There’s way more gays at raves than the community center right ya’ll I was like Hey I’m am home baby. You guys need to start coming to Diesel that’s where I be at on Thursdays.”

“I always go with you,” Lauren agreed.

“That’s the one they throw at The Tunnel right?” Eddie asked and Lauren nodded yes.

I frowned my face, “Oh, I can’t go there cuz they always want I.D. I had a fake one but I lost it and I ain’t eighteen yet. Same with The Limelight they stay turning me away.”

Jie laughed, “Damn Rama I always forget that you’re only sixteen girl. When I was sixteen my mom wouldn’t let me do shit but you be doing whatever the fuck you want.”

I looked at Lauren and we started laughing, “Actually I ran away from home last night, cuz my moms was tryna block my flow.”

Eddie’s eyes were about to pop out of his head, “Details?”

“My evil twin told her all my business that’s now she thinks that I’mma TV stealing drug addict and shit,” I explained to them.

“That’s fucked up that she’d tell your mom all your business, shit my parents don’t even know I’m gay yet.” Jie let us know with an eyebrow raised.

"Umm, sorry to break the news to you Jie but there's no way ya parents don't know that shit I mean c'mon your fierceness cannot be denied." I snapped my fingers three times in a circular motion while saying, "Three snaps in a circle." We all broke out in laughter.

Friday night came around pretty fast and I was more than ready to go to a rave, this was my third day at my new job and it was finally time to clock out. Lauren still had two more hours to go and on my way out the door she hollered something about catching up with me at the club. I lit a cigarette and walked straight to the park since Chris and Shane had promised to meet me there when I'd spoken to them earlier.

While I walked through the park I heard someone callout, "Fajita." I knew that it was Chris because that's what he liked to call me. I spotted them sitting on a bench and rushed over, "What's up?"

"Chillin', yo you just got off work?" Chris asked after I hugged him

"Yup yup," I answered already hugging Shane.

"Did you get paid yet?" Shane asked me while he blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"No. I gotsta wait two fuckin' weeks," I said taking a seat on the bench.

"You ready to go to the club or you wanna smoke this blunt first?" Shane asked holding the blunt out toward me.

"Oh it's already rolled, spark it up then," I told him with excitement. I leaned back and looked around the park for awhile, "Where's Tara at?"

Shane managed to speak in between his coughing, "She had to work late but she's gonna meet us there."

"So is Lauren," I added.

Chris chuckled, "Ain't she like a candy raver or some shit?"

I turned my face up at him jokingly, "No, well sorta, she likes to liquid dance with the glow sticks and all that but she don't be all zoned out in cuddle puddles or any of that shit."

"I only saw her once before when you was with your girlfriend, she's mad tiny yo," Chris said still chuckling here and there.

"I don't really care 'bout nunna that shit, she took me in when ya'll wouldn't that's for damn sure," I added as I took the blunt from Chris and flicked the ashes.

"Here we go, I knew it," Shane blurted out, shaking his head.

I shrugged my shoulders at him and blew out a puff of gray smoke, "It's all good, whatever, my sister never been to Laurens house so that was my best bet anyways."

"You know we gotcha back Rama," Chris threw in before standing in front of me and placing a small, pink baggy on my lap.

I looked up at him while I slid it into my pocket, "What's this?"

"Huh, oh that's this chick named Crystal," he said with a wink.

I spoke with excitement now, "You already hooked me up with Mary Jane now you giving me Crystal damn Chris gots all the bitches."

We laughed for a moment, I was thankful for the gift and it made me think that they might just feel a tad bit guilty. When we were done smoking we headed to the club it was on a nice quiet block and the line moved pretty fast. Once I got inside I ran into a lot of friends that I hadn't seen lately and I loved the music the DJ was spinning. The atmosphere was really

comfortable too but the best thing about the club was that there was no Leah.

Tara met up with us late into the night and so did Lauren and she seemed disappointed when I told her that Jie and Eddie never showed. She wasn't enjoying herself either she was busy complaining that the house was too vocal and the techno wasn't hitting hard enough. We were two different kinds of ravers and as we danced I found myself wondering why I hadn't noticed that shit 'til just now.

I awoke to the horrid sounds of Lauren crying out in pain and I forced myself to get up while wiping the sleep away from my tired eyes. When I pushed her door open I froze at the sight of her skinny, frail body curled up on the floor. She had a white sheet wrapped around her and her face was covered in tears I started to run toward her but Shana zoomed right in front of me and slammed the door in my face. I knocked on it anyway and cleared my throat, "Lauren are you alright?"

Instead of Lauren's voice I heard Shana's telling me, "She's fine, maybe you should go for a walk or something Rama we need a little bit of privacy."

I backed away from the door with my mind in tangles, what the fuck is going on in there? Does she have some kind of illness? I didn't know what secret she was hiding but it was clear that they didn't want me around right now.

I quickly got dressed to the sound of their muffled voices but I couldn't make out any words. I shook my head as I slid my backpack over my shoulders and walked out the door. The stairwell was hot and muggy as I rushed down them busting out of the front door and hitting the pavement.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead wishing that I could wipe away the image of what I'd just seen just as easily. The way she was lying there on the floor looking so helpless and

frail and her skin was so pale, practically the same color as her sheets. I smoked cigarette after cigarette with the sun beaming on my face all the while as I tried to make sense of it all.

Wondering around aimlessly for a few hours was all I ended up doing when I decided to pay attention again I was close to Central Park. When I got there I found myself a lonely bench and sat on it then pulled my book out along with my pen. I hated writing in my books especially ones so dear to my heart but I had no paper and I needed to write. I needed to forget about Lauren if only for a moment,

“I feel defeated now  
Now that life has passed me by  
I’ve realized that it had been a game all along  
And I lost  
My life is gone now  
Nothing ever came of it  
As I sit here today looking at my reflection in the lake  
I can catch a glimpse of me every now and again  
A pebble is tossed  
Ripples spread across the filthy brown water  
Atop with floating leaves  
And the suns diamond sparkles  
Trying to forget  
That I lost this game  
Trying to remember  
If I ever even had a chance  
Did I even exist?  
Than it comes back to me  
I did exist  
I had my chance.”

The evening breeze fondled my face and gently lifted my papers to let me know that it agreed with me. I shook my head and looking away from my book allowed the world to come back into focus. That's when I realized that sunset was on its way and there was no one that I'd rather walk with. I put everything away, slid my arms through the straps of my backpack and headed back home.

The moon had become very bright while I dragged my feet with my hands in my pockets acknowledging all the beauty around me from the historical essence of fire escapes to the artistic genius of graffiti, it was a great pastime. Lauren was hiding something from me keeping secrets so that meant that I couldn't trust her or anyone else for that matter. Why is my life so screwed up? Why couldn't I be like everyone else who woke up every morning wanting to live instead of always wanting to die, why did god make me like this?

At some point I ended up back in front of her building and with raised eyebrows I took a deep breath and walked up the stairs. I slid my key into the lock and turned it slowly unsure of what I might find. I was relieved to see that Lauren was alive and well sitting on the couch wrapped in a pink terrycloth house robe. The TV was turned on and she was holding a cigarette in one hand and the remote in the other. She looked over at me with tired eyes and a sluggish smile, "What's up Rama?" Patting the cushion next to her, "Sit down I need to talk to you."

I closed the door behind me and sat down beside her, "What's up Lauren? What the fuck happened to you this earlier?"

"That's what I wanna talk to you about, you've been gone for mad long, you had me thinking I scared you off for a minute there." She let out a worn giggle, "I know that you're

wondering why I didn't tell you what was really going on with me but that's because I didn't want you to tell Jie and Eddie about it."

I wasn't exactly following her but I didn't want her to know that so I just nodded my head as if I understood. "Uh huh and," I said as I lit myself a cigarette and she continued.

"I don't know how it—it even happened exactly but one minute I was doing dope whenever I wanted to and the next I was getting sick if I didn't have it."

I sat up straight finally realizing what she was talking about, "You're addicted to heroin?"

She fixed her eyes back on the TV and was slow to respond, "Yeah but I'm going to rehab soon, I'm just waiting until I'm eligible for medical at the market." She explained while she sniffed and scratched simultaneously.

"So what, you gotta have that shit every day?" She nodded yes just before I asked, "And Leah, Jie and Eddie don't know about this?"

Her eyes woke up then, "No and you can't tell them Rama."

"Okay, I won't. Are you okay now?" I was concerned and confused all at the same time.

"Yeah two bags hold me over for about six hours," she explained in an oddly normal kind of way.

I sat my cigarette in the ashtray, "You looked out for me and I'm really grateful for that so I gotcha back, I ain't sayin' nuthin' to nobody. That's your business." Sighing deeply I pulled some balled up money out of my pocket and started straightening them out, "Whoa, that's a lot to absorb I mean I guess that's better than having Cancer or something, I was thinking all types of shit but damn that's still fucked up." I ran my free hand over my forehead a few times, "Now I need to get high my damn self."

"You want some dope? I'm about to do a bag." She pulled the faded pink paper out her pocket, unfolded it, dumped the powdery contents onto the fold out tray that was beside her and started lining it out.

I was surprised that she offered me some after she'd just told me how dangerous the drug was. "But what if I get addicted to it too?" I asked knowing that I was going to snort that shit regardless because that's how much I didn't give a fuck.

"You won't that's only if you do it all the time," she assured me as she sniffed the first two lines. I sniffed the next two and then we watched TV together the both of us never saying another word besides when she'd remind me to stop scratching.

The next day Chris and Shane came to pick me up and we went for a drive around the city shoving plenty crystal and k' up our noses along the way. After a few hours we ended up back at my place, creeping quietly in the darkness since everyone was sleeping. I turned the TV on for a little light but kept the volume down then I took one more bump of k' before sitting down. Suddenly it became very hard for me to concentrate and I couldn't conjure enough energy to speak. My head started spinning so I lay down and just that quick drifted into a comatose like state unable to move or open my eyes, but somehow I was still able to hear what was going on around me even if they thought I couldn't.

I listened since that was all I could do and Shane eventually said, "She probably just needs to sleep it off."

Chris was a bit more concerned saying, "Dude, what if she ohdee'd we shouldn't just leave her. We should probably wake up Lauren or sumthin'!"

He was right even I was convinced that I'd just overdosed and was about to die at any moment so I guess that's why they left me there because they didn't want to have to explain my dead body. If the roles were reversed I probably would have left too but that's what I wanted...to be alone, I wasn't afraid to die I was relieved that this life was finally over.

Shortly after they'd gone Lauren woke up and walked passed me on her way to the bathroom. When she came back out she took my shoes off and covered me with a blanket while she called out my name a few times. I still couldn't open my eyes or move otherwise I would have let her know that I was about to die. I didn't want her to get in any trouble and I'm sure no one would want to wake up to someone dead on their couch but it was my time to go. I felt my soul slipping into a blank space and there was nothing that I could do about it even if I wanted to there was only darkness.

When I awoke the next day it was late in the afternoon I yawned as I sat up stretching my arms in the air and cracking my knuckles. Then I realized that I hadn't died and found myself holding back tears, I had been so sure that last night was the end of this bullshit life. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and looked around, the apartment was empty everyone got ready for work and left out this morning right around what could have possibly been my dead body.

I shook my head and grabbed my bag out of Laurens room, took a shower and fixed myself a bowl of cereal. While I was eating and laughing at the TV the front door flew open and Lauren came falling inside with tiny Shana trying her best to hold her up.

Laurens flimsy body collapsed into the chair directly across from me and Shana pulled out a bag of dope. I just stared at Lauren in disbelief while Shana lined it out on the kitchens

glass table top, she looked like a sick, helpless puppy the way she was bent over in that chair fiending for that shit. But mostly she looked like a fucking idiot, how could she allow that drug to grab hold of her like that?

I shook my head ignoring them as I sat my bowl on the counter and slid into my sneakers then I walked out the door. I needed to get away from Laurens drama and it was entirely too hot today to be playing caretaker. The streets were flooded with people and the sun was beating on my face, Chris and Shane popped into my mind as I wiped away the beads of sweat away. They abandoned me last night I thought they were better friends than that but then again no one seems to be who I thought they were.

I ended up at Matt's front door and it felt good that someone was actually happy to see me. He kept asking me if I'd eaten and although I told him yes every time he still insisted that we go out to eat and I eventually gave in. We walked to the Yaffa Café he told me to order whatever I wanted so I did before going back to his place and watching a few movies. After our fifth blunt I passed out right there on the couch forgetting all about work the next morning but when Matt woke up and started getting ready for his job he reminded me of the importance of keeping mines. Even though I was twenty minutes late and in the same outfit from the day before I took Matt's advice and he was sweet enough to walk with me all the way to the market.

Lauren was there and we took our lunch breaks at the same time just as we'd always done but today she was full of apologies. I cut her off not wanting to hear it, "Whatever Lauren, like you really need help right now, not whenever you get your medical. Can't the community center help you out or sumthin?"

She laughed as we walked through the streets of the Greenwich Village drinking our Snapple's, "They might but I don't want anyone to know, it's too embarrassing Rama."

"That's why you didn't tell me?" I asked her still trying to sort it all out in my head.

"Yeah and I feel so fucked up about that, I shoulda told you," she expressed herself like a child although she was twenty six and there was really no need to explain anything to me, I couldn't help her.

Lauren was done with work before me and although I told her that I'd be coming straight home when I got off I didn't, I was tired of being around her sickly ass. I walked to a payphone and called my only real friend in this world and as I listened to her phone ringing prepared to hang up if her mom answered I heard her voice, "What's up home slice?"

She laughed and I could tell she was happy to hear from me, "What's up jive turkey is everything good witcha?"

I told her about my new job and made everything sound like a dream, there was nothing she could do to help me so why make her worry. She told me that my mother had called her house looking for me a few days ago Johanna denied ever seeing me of course but my mother had given her a message to pass along to me anyway. She'd told Johanna that if she sees me at a rave to tell me not to come home unless I'm ready to go straight to rehab. Before we got off the phone she explained that I shouldn't call her anymore because her mother was starting to get suspicious and she didn't want me to get caught. I didn't want to put her in that predicament so I agreed and told her that if she ever wanted to see me she could always find me at The Roxy on Friday nights.

When I got home everyone was asleep, I let out a sigh of relief I didn't want to talk to anyone, I grabbed my folded

blankets off the arm of the couch, wrapped myself in them and silently cried myself to sleep. I couldn't help but feel like I'd just lost my only friend and Johanna didn't come to raves in the city very often so I didn't know if I'd ever see her again. That night I dreamt about us, we were at a rave dancing together all night long the way we use to.

Weeks had come and gone and my heart grew heavier with each passing day, the sights of the city weren't as inspiring to me anymore. I felt empty and I hated myself I was doing smack with Lauren just about every other day now and I called out to work a lot. Laurens roommate Shana turned out to be a complete basket case and I was sick and tired of listening to all of her conspiracy theories. She even kept a loaded gun in her room in the top draw and whenever she'd do a few lines of coke she'd always whip it out and start telling crazy stories about how the government tried kill her a few years back. I was absolutely positive that all of the blow she was sniffing played a major part in her paranoia.

One night they all went out to a twenty one and over club and I was left home alone just me, the cats and the jazz music blasting from the neighboring apartment. I was sitting on the couch with the remote in my hand casually flipping through the channels and eating out the cereal box when I realized that "A street car named Desire" was on. I felt excited at first because it was one of my favorite movies and I hadn't seen it in such a long time. But after a few minutes of watching it an over flow of emotions hit me like a ton of bricks and I began to sob hysterically suddenly remembering the past.

I'd tried so hard to forget all the bad things but those memories seemed to pop up whenever they felt like it and tonight I couldn't escape them. My depression crept up

and took me over entirely I wanted to die so bad that it was actually causing my heart pain.

My stupidities lead me to believe that there was something better for me, that there was some kind of amazing life waiting for me here. I guess I just needed to believe that then, I guess that I needed to believe that life wasn't this empty... this loveless. I mean here I was living in an apartment with people all over twenty five and letting Lauren turn me into a junkhead even though I knew better. At one point I thought I was better than that but whenever I saw any drugs nowadays I wanted nothing more for myself than to get high.

My mind kept going back to what Johanna had told me about my mother I wasn't exactly surprised at her message but I could hear the astonishment in her voice. She must have thought my mom would have been more upset about me than she was. Even I was a little surprised that there was nothing more, no tears, no I miss my daughter dearly and I'm worried sick, nothing more than the words she'd say to an addict. She must have driven me to Johanna's house over a dozen times, she knew the road like the back of her hand and yet she called instead of showing up in person. That meant that she didn't care if I was sitting right there next to Johanna when they were on the phone and the rehab message was just a strategy to make sure that I stay away.

There was nothing here for me not in New York City or anywhere else in the universe my existence was absolutely meaningless. With the blink of my eyes a few more tears fell and I'd made the decision to kill myself. It made me feel a little better too, knowing that I didn't have to suffer if I didn't want to, that I still had one more option, another escape route. I pushed myself up off the couch and walked into Shana's bedroom, slide her top draw open and found her gun hiding

amongst her silk bras and panties. Without giving it a second thought I locked myself in the bathroom then I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror and it took all my might not to smash it. I shook my head and backed away from the sink, I couldn't bear to look at the person I'd become when my back bumped into the door I slowly slid to the floor crying uncontrollably.

The weight of life felt just as heavy as this gun in my hand, I wiped my face with my sleeve and tried to regain my composer. But I couldn't stop my mind from digging everything right back up and all my pain was still as fresh as the day it all happened. The way I'd lost my innocence at the hands of my cold blooded older sister and the way I lost my mother's respect because of my twin sister. I held the gun out in front of me and stared at it, why couldn't I have a mom and dad who hugged me all the time and spoiled me rotten?

"Maybe the next life will be better, it's gotta be," I whispered to myself breathing deeply and slowly then I raised the old looking six shooter to my head. I pressed the cold steal into my temple and squeezed the trigger but nothing happened. With the pout of my lips more tears fell, why didn't the gun go off?

After further examination I realized that it wasn't loaded, did she even have bullets for this thing? I placed her gun back in the draw feeling even more disappointed in myself than I had before. I lay on the couch burying myself under blankets and pillows and crying until I feel asleep.

I'd overslept the next day and was running late to work so I got dressed and rushed out the door in a hurry. When I exited the building I saw Chris leaned against his car waiting for me, I rolled my eyes at him and kept walking.

He laughed as he followed me and grabbed my arm, "Fajita wait, I'm sorry."

I sucked my teeth as I turned around and snatched my arm back, looking up at him angrily, "Why'd ya'll just leave me hangin'?"

"I'm sorry, that was a wack move but we were fucked up too. I—I wasn't thinking clearly, yo I'm mad sorry Fajita," he explained before trying to hug me.

I pushed him away and folded my arms, "Look I gotta go, I'm crazy late for work."

He grabbed my hand, "C'mon, I'll give you a ride."

I followed him back to his car and when he opened the door for me I got in and folded my arms. He looked over at me every time we hit a red light but he didn't say anything to me for awhile. My eyes followed his hand as he pulled out the ashtray in the center of the dashboard and took out a tiny baggy that I assumed was crystal. I unfolded my arms and asked, "What's that?"

He tossed it onto my lap, "Here, that's for you."

I held it out and tapped it a few times, "Thanks, it's crystal right?"

He nodded, "Yeah."

I poured a pile on my thumb knuckle and sniffed it up then I looked over at him, "You want a bump?"

He shook his head, "Nah that's all you, I'm really sorry for leaving you like that Fajita."

I tucked the baggy into my pocket sniffing wildly as he pulled the car over in front of the market. He reached over and hugged me goodbye while I said, "It's all good Chris, I love you and I'll call you later."

I hopped out, slammed the door and went inside once I clocked in I headed straight to the restroom. I wanted to

do another bump quickly before I started greeting all these lame ass customers but just as I was pouring the powder onto my knuckle one of the cashiers walked in and saw me. She ran right back out so I shrugged my shoulders and sniffed up my crystal. When I walked back up the steps the boss was standing at my register waiting for me, he fired me with no questions asked and I left quietly embarrassed.

I walked up those dreaded five flights of stairs real slow preparing to tell Lauren what had happened. I stopped in front of the door to whisper to myself, "Here goes nothing." My eyes took a few minutes to absorb what I was seeing, Lauren curled up on the floor moaning in pain. Her skin was pasty and she must have thrown up somewhere because the apartment reeked of vomit.

I rushed over to her but when I touched her she screamed out in agony, I quickly pulled away, "Lauren what should I do?"

She was in too much pain to answer me, so I grabbed the phone and called Shana at her job dialing the phone number that was taped to the fridge as fast as I could. I waited for what felt like hours and when she finally picked up I explained everything. She told me to stay calm and wait for her then she told me that every muscle in Laurens body was aching and that's why it hurt when I touched her.

I placed the phone back on the hook and knelt on the floor beside her as she cried out in pain over and over again. She looked so thin and frail, it brought tears to my eyes I couldn't help but think that this was just about all the pain her poor body could stand. I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that she wasn't going to make it through this one.

"Please hang in there Lauren, hold on please don't die on me," my mind reverted back to the only thing I knew how to do in scary situations, pray.

Shana finally came busting in the door looking the same way that I felt, afraid for Laurens life. I stood up and backed away relieved to see her and I quietly watched her line the dope but I unexpectedly lost control over my tears at the sight of Lauren sniffing it off the floor. Because of the pain she could barely move or lift her head so she had no choice. My voice told on my emotions when I asked, "Why'd you take so long?"

Shana looked up at me while I repeatedly sniffled and wiped tears away, "I had to stop at Washington Heights to get the shit—hey why don't you take a cold shower and calm down, she's going to be fine I promise."

I did as she suggested and got in the shower in an attempt to recompose myself besides it was getting late and I needed to get ready for "Together". By the time I came back out of the bathroom Lauren was back in her pink terrycloth robe sitting on the couch watching the televisions. I was suddenly flooded with anger and disgust I couldn't bring myself to speak to her right now, I'd lost all respect for her. She was like a newborn baby that needed someone to care for her, she was weak and helpless and it was starting to really get to me.

I could feel her eyes on me when I walked passed but I ignored her and went in her room to finish getting ready. After I was dressed I slid into my kicks and walked passed her again but I didn't so much as glance in her direction on my to the fridge after fixing myself a bowl of cereal I sat down at the table. I had to say something to her, I couldn't allow her to see my anger otherwise she might kick me out so I pushed my feelings aside and gave her a short smile.

She surprised me by handing me a plastic bag with a pack of Dipsey doodles, Newport Lights, a Mountain Dew inside. She must have brought these for me earlier but ended up getting sick, that was really thoughtful of her but how could such a nice person be such an idiot? “Good lookin’ out, now I got some stoges for the club.”

“You’re about to go out?” She asked me in a tired voice.

I banged my cigarette pack upside down on the table a few times to pack the tobacco before opening them, “Yeah, it’s Friday night I always go to “Together” on Fridays, you wanna come with?” I asked her already knowing she’d say no, she hadn’t been to a rave with me in quite some time.

“No, I don’t really like the crowd there, it’s too many preppy dressing ravers wearing their baseball caps halfway to the side for my taste.” Her attention went back to the TV as she started flicking through the channels again.

I lit my cigarette but I didn’t offer her one since she smoked non menthols, I took a deep drag and exhaled, “What you don’t like the polo crowd?”

“Not really,” she replied before laughing at something on the TV.

“But that’s me tho’ and besides I just love “Together” so much, the vibe, the crowd, the DJ’s...everything.” I took another long pull from my cigarette and my words exited with the smoke, “I feel what you saying though, you like the warehouse raves and shit.”

She looked at me, “You know what rave I miss? “Culture”, that was on Fridays too right?” She asked me as she lit herself a cigarette.

I flicked my ashes into the ashtray, “Yeah, that’s where I met you at, you was hanging with Leah that night.”

"Oh my god! Crazy ass Leah, I hate that bitch." Lauren smiled and shook her head.

I swallowed some cereal down and added jokingly, "Yeah she's too conceited that's why I had to cut her ass off."

"I miss those days though, you, me, Leah, Eddie and Jie we use to have mad fun." She pulled a tiny folded card out of her pocket, dumped a powdery substance onto her tray and lined it out before looking over at me, "Want some?"

"Nah, I'm straight," not with the way she looked earlier and how scared for her I was, nah fuck that shit.

"Why? You holding out for some crystal?" She asked before she sniffed up a line.

"Yeah, they got that good shit going around right now," I told her smiling.

"What? Peanut butter?" She asked leant back into the couch now her eyes reduced to slits.

"Nah pink champagne, the same shit Leah use to be sellin'. You want me to bring you back a bag?"

She dug into her robe and lazily handed me a twenty, "Yeah." Then she started in with the scratching and I was ready to go despite not answering her question, I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have wanted to hear my answer. I wanted to miss the old days too but I didn't instead I felt like that book I read in the eighth grade "That was then this is now". That was before I knew any better now I don't hang with dilly ass candy ravers anymore. She was just one of the few friends that survived that transition and I wish she hadn't, I wish that I never met her.

I tucked her money inside one of the small compartments of my backpack before sliding it onto my shoulders. It was probably best not to tell her about getting fired just yet besides I'm sure she'll hear all about it tomorrow when she

clocked in. I stood up and deeming it best told her what she wanted to hear, “But yeah man I miss them days too.”

I wiped the ashes that had fallen from my cigarette off my pants she was nodding off now but she was smiling to herself at the same time. She was smiling at her false happiness always too high to see that what used to be never really was. I shook my head, “Lemme get going.”

Somehow Lauren managed to say, “Wait Rama?”

I looked over my shoulder, “Whassup?”

“What was that language you were speaking earlier?” Her voice was weak.

“Oh, Arabic you know I’m Muslim right?” I was almost certain she didn’t remember back in the day when we hung out all night. She was so sad because she’d just broken up with her girlfriend so we talked and danced until she cheered up. That’s when I’d told her all about Islam, that seemed like ages ago now in a time when things were simple, a time when the rave meant more to her than the drug. When she was still happy and vibrant now she was a different person, a sadder person she’d been reduced to nothing more than a drug addict.

## 5.

As soon as I turned the corner onto 18<sup>th</sup> street a rush of excitement ran through my body just as it always did when I saw the line of ravers and heard the soft sounds of house music escaping the building. I'd been to a lot of raves at this point in my life one's they've thrown outdoors, in warehouses, raceways and under bridges but I always preferred the nightclubs. Out of all the nightclubs in New York City that had a rave scene this is the one I loved the most. My favorite DJ's spun here and all my friends come here so I loved everything about the place especially the name. "Together" I thought that name was perfect because ravers weren't your typical partiers we were on some love, peace and happiness shit... togetherness type shit.

When I reached the other side of the street people were already calling out my name. A lot of kids thought I was still selling blow and wanted to buy some, at times like that all I could think was if I still had a way to get coke I'd be making some serious dough right now.

I was ecstatic when I ran into Jie and Eddie and so were they, they always had some gossip for me but what they had to tell me tonight was rather unexpected. They said Lauren told them that she was in love with me and they were pretty sure that's why she jumped at the opportunity to let me live

with her, I laughed and pretended not to care. “Please she’s not my type at all,” Is what I told them but that didn’t stop them from explaining every detail of her infatuation with me. There was always a reason behind people’s kindness so why did I expect her to be any different. She already had mad skeletons in her closet now I find out that she’s been manipulating me and trying to win over my sympathy with one goal in mind, to hook up with me.

I thought she brought me soda, cigarettes and drugs because she was looking out for me but all this time she was trying to buy my love? Was she trying to get me strung out on dope too the same way a pimp would to capture one of his potential hoes? Lauren definitely had ulterior motives so why should I keep her secret anymore? If she would have told me about her heroin problem when I’d asked to live with her there’s no way I would have stayed at her place and now I’m smack in the middle of this twenty six year olds drug addicted life.

I jumped right back into the conversation now, “Lauren got some nerve tho’ this bitch gonna move me out here without tellin’ me that she hooked on that shit?” They just stood there with their mouths wide open.

Eddie finally broke the silence in need of a little clarification, “That shit?”

“Umm, diesel Eddie, what the fuck,” Jie smacked the back of Eddie’s head softly.

I nodded yes as I continued, “I ain’t find that shit out until she was all dopesick one morning and it was a real traumatic experience for me ya’ll. Seeing her like that—”

Jie sucked his teeth adding, “I knew that bitch was hooked on that shit because she just stopped chillin’ with us like all of

a sudden and shit. Wait Rama you're not doing that shit with her are you?"

One thing I wasn't was a liar so I uncomfortably nodded yes and explained, "I mean I got my own bullshit going on and every time I turn around she's tryna get me to do some with her."

Eddie had one hand on his hip now, "Yeah but you're only sixteen, how could she really have the nerve to be shoving that shit in your face? You need to get outta there girl before she gets you hooked on that shit too." He scratched the tip of his nose and quickly looked around.

Jie placed a hand over his mouth just to pull it away dramatically, "Oh shit girl, what if Leah finds out about this? She will kill her for giving you that shit."

I sucked my teeth, "Don't even tell her about it, Leah really needs to sit the fuck down and stop worrying about me. I'm not her girl no more I can take care of myself."

Now Eddie's hand was pressed to his chest and the other hadn't moved off his hip, "Well someone needs to tell her that cuz that bitch ain't get the memo. Oh yeah, like I guess your moms called her looking for you and every since she heard that you left home that bitch has asked about you every time we see her."

"Umm, don't tell her none of this shit ya'll," I attempted to look serious.

The line had disappeared and we were at the door now while the bouncer patted us down ever so lightly Jie sucked his teeth and said, "Why would I do that."

We walked inside the nightclub, headed straight for the dance floor and were lost in the music just as quick. Dancing helped me to forget and forgetting helped life feel right... when I could forget it's every detail.

My attention was diverted to a circling crowd of people who were watching two guys I'd never seen before challenging each other. I made my way over to them bopping my head while I looked on admiring how smooth their dance styles were. Then he turned around and I saw him, the amazing dancer I'd been watching spun around and I fell in love. He was wearing a red polo cap and a matching polo shirt with a pair of wide leg jeans and his smile was so hypnotic that I couldn't look away. He was the cutest white boy I'd ever seen and his dance moves were impressive, the guy had skills.

He flowed to the beat so naturally yet somehow made the music appear as if it were really moving through his body. I moved closer still watching his every move, he noticed me, our eyes connected and it made time stand still for a moment.

I felt shy but I had to meet him, I held my hand out and signaled for him to come closer his eyes never releasing their hold on me while he approached. A stir of excitement twirled through my body like my soul was awakened, if my heart was a cassette tape than no one had ever placed play until now.

"What's up?" His smile seemed so bright in this dark club.

"Hi, I'm Rama, Umm, I wanted to tell you that you got skills on the floor. Yo, I was like lovin' ya every move," I complimented.

He seemed flattered by that as he spoke, "Word? Thanks, I be watching you dance too your styles mad cute, oh and I'm Ryan by the way."

I placed a hand to my chest feeling flattered that he liked my dancing, "Thanks." Then I asked inquisitively, "Hey, why have I never seen you before Ryan? Are you from the city?"

"Nah I'm from upstate like you", he told me and I had to find my way out of his smile.

"I knew it!" I said happily, "The way you dance reminds me of upstate ravers." I let out a few giggles then it hit me, "Wait a minute, how'd you know that I was from upstate?"

He raised an eyebrow, "Your friend Johanna use to date my brother Greg."

I gave him a raised eyebrow in return, "I never heard about him, that musta been before I started chillin' with her heavy." That made me wonder aloud, "You ever been to the Roxy before tonight?"

He gave me an of course I have look, "Yeah, I been coming here since this shit started."

Now I was really stumped, "How could I not have noticed you before now? I guess that goes to show how blazed I be."

"What you be doin'?" He asked me in my ear.

"Crystal mostly, that's my shit," I let him know as I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and placed one in my mouth. I could tell he wanted to get to know me and I was very happy about that.

"Yeah, that's all I really fucks with too," his eyes went to my cigarette box while he pulled his pack out of his pocket and pointed to it, "Oh shit, we smoke the same brand."

He offered me a light and the flame illuminated our faces for a second, "You going back upstate after this?"

My mind exercised the possibility that he'd be turned off by all my drama but honesty has always been my policy. I breathed deeply first, "No, actually I ran away from home."

To my surprise he gave me another smile, "Yo, that's mad crazy!"

"What?" I was anxious to hear why he found the one thing that I thought might scare him off so interesting.

"Me too," he lit himself a cigarette now still smiling at me.

I was in disbelief, “Yeah right, you ran away from home?” I was oblivious to the nightclub happenings around me...I only saw him.

Ryan nodded and laughed, “In a way, yeah, I just never went back.”

He was slightly taller than me, he was standing close enough for me to see that now and he had a muscular build. I leaned closer to his ear, “So you’re living in the city too?”

He nodded, “I’m crashing at my boys crib right now, yo since you’re not going back upstate what are you getting into when this is over?”

I blew out a cloud of smoke and pointed a finger into his chest, “Chillin’ with you.”

“Aiight,” he agreed pleasingly then the DJ spun my song, I rocked to the beat and smiled excitedly. “Is this your song?”

I nodded, “I been waiting for him to put this on all night.”

“Let’s dance,” he said as he took my hand and led me out to a roomier spot on the floor. The music was so loud that we could barely hear each other so we danced together instead, for the rest of the night.

When the party ended Ryan walked with me outside and although I was still inattentive to the rest of the world the peacefulness of the pale blue sky managed to catch my eye. Ryan’s peoples wanted him to go with them and my peoples wanted me to hang out with them but we dissed everybody and walked down the streets of New York City hand in hand under the soft glow of the dawning sky.

“How far is your place from here?” He asked.

I pointed in that direction, “106<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam.”

He made a funny face at that before saying, “Damn that’s kinda far, wanna take the subway?”

"Yeah, okay." We turned the corner and headed in that direction walking and talking while the sun rose and took its place above us, "So how old are you?"

He lit himself a cigarette, "Sixteen."

"Say word? Me too!" My voice was full of excitement, "Wait when's your birthday?"

"September 29<sup>th</sup>. When's yours?" He asked me back.

"December 29<sup>th</sup>," I playfully patted him on his shoulder. "Relax, you're older than me and I we're compatible."

He laughed, "We're compatible?"

"Yes, you're a Libra and I'm a Capricorn and those two signs get along really well so that's cool." I couldn't stop smiling and my face was starting to hurt because of it.

"Damn you know zodiac signs off the top of ya head like that?" He asked me through his enticing smile.

We waited for the light to change while I explained, "Well yeah, astrology gives you a little insight on people and tells you what signs go good together."

The light changed and it was our turn to cross the street, "Oh so we make a good couple? Yeah, that's definitely good to know." He slid his arm around my shoulder and I slid mine around his waist.

We discussed our favorite songs, the furthest distance we'd traveled for a rave and exchanged stories about what raves we'd been to. Somewhere in between we hopped a turnstyle and rode the train but our conversation never missed a beat.

After a long walk up a lengthy flight of stairs we entered my quiet apartment it was full of an early morning kind of silence. I motioned for him to stop where he was before tip toeing to Laurens room and cracking the door just enough to peek in. A smile graced my face when I saw that she wasn't home then I walked back over to Ryan, took his hand and

pulled him into her bedroom. Closing the door behind us as we lay on her bed and got to know each other better in-between kisses.

Here I was thinking that life was nothing more than a vibrant rose that had once been in full bloom but had since dried out and was always at risk of crumbling or blowing away if hit by a strong enough wind. Simply meeting him tonight has made life seem amazing again, I never dreamed that a person could make me feel this way.

Kissing him wasn't the same as with Leah, with her it felt like I was kissing my best friend. His kiss felt entirely different, his kiss aroused every inch of me and melted away all my troubles. He pulled away but not far and I looked into his eyes, "So do you have any other brothers or sisters besides Greg?"

"Nah, just my big bro' but I haven't seen him much since I left home, what about you?" He took his cap off and sat it on the floor beside the bed revealing his short flattened brownish blonde hair.

I sighed at the ceiling, "I just got two sisters but I haven't seen them since I left home and I don't want to."

"That's why you left?" He asked in a gentle voice.

"Yeah, when they found out I was bi-polar they started treating me like I was nuts or sumthin'" I shook my head at the memory in disgust.

He gently ran his hand up and down my arm, "How did you know you were bi-polar?"

"Cuz I tried to kill myself when I was thirteen and my mom locked me in the hospital, that's when they tried to put me on medication that I refuse to take," I wondered if I was telling him too much too soon.

"Word? I'm supposed to be taking some pills for attention deficit disorder and that shits still at my house," we both exchanged a small laugh.

I intertwined my fingers with his and looked into his sparkling green eyes as I said, "So don't mind me if I get a little depressed sometimes."

He laughed, "Okay and don't mind me if I ignore you sometimes." we laughed a little longer.

"Is that what it makes you do, ignore people?" I asked curiously.

He sat up and took off his polo shirt revealing his white t-shirt underneath, "Yeah, like if two people are talking to me I can only focus on one of 'em, sometimes it's worse than other times."

"I never even heard of that shit before," I told him as I silently admired his physique.

He laughed again, "Neither did I 'til they told me I had it." He looked a bit more serious now, "Can I ask you something?" He didn't give me a chance to answer, "Why'd you try to kill yourself you were still a little kid?"

My eyes darted back to the white ceiling above us feeling a little shy, "I dunno I guess I just wanted to get away from my family, my mother tries to control me too much. Like how is she tryna make me go to rehab when she's a fucking drug dealer? How the fuck does that work?"

The lines of sunlight creeping through the blinds reflected brightly off his astonished face, "What? Get the fuck outta here, ya mom ain't no drug dealer?" He challenged my words.

"Hey I didn't live upstate all my life ya know, my moms learned a thing or two from when we lived in Brooklyn. That's where I was born, were you born upstate?" I turned on my side and pushed up on my elbows just enough to rest my

head in my hand. I'd never told anyone that my mom was a drug dealer and it actually felt really good to finally let go of that secret.

"Nope I was born in Jersey," he said mimicking a New Jersey accent.

"Oh you's a garden state boy, figures," I poked fun at him. He chuckled, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I meant that in a good way cuz some of the coolest ravers that I've ever had the pleasure of meeting come from Jersey," I gave him another kiss.

"Whoa why are you tryna change the subject tho'? Let's get back to your moms," he teased.

I wanted to talk about it more too since it was my first time, "Here's a typical day in my house, I wake up in the morning and on my way to the bathroom I'm not walking pass her whipping up eggs and pancakes in the kitchen. Nah, instead I'm walking pass her cutting the coke, cooking some into crack and bagging it all up in the kitchen. She be rockin' the surgical mask and gloves making me feel like I'm in some sorta ill science lab or sumthin'. They came in handy once I started raving cuz I would always take some with me to the raves and smear vapo rub all in it."

"Get the fuck outta here you use to be one of them ravers walkin' around lookin' all beamed the fuck up with the mask on ya face?" He was enjoying this way too much.

I giggled, "Knock it off, I grew outta that shit pretty quick, anyways like I was sayin' she even let me and my twin sell coke at raves. She showed us how to weigh it out, cut it and bag it up too."

He laughed, "Oh, that's why Edna asked me if you were sellin' blow last night? I was like huh, nah I don't think she is."

I frowned, "Well not anymore anyways, not since my twin ratted me out she told my moms that I was using crystal. She's the reason my moms wants to put me in rehab, that's why I had to runaway I basically had no choice."

"That's the same reason why I haven't been home, my parents told me I couldn't go out. They like, wanted to put me on a schedule where I had to be back in by ten I was like uh huh, yeah, okay. I did that shit for like one week or sumthin I don't even know all I know is that by that next weekend I'm like fuck this shit." We laughed then he stopped abruptly, "Wait a minute you have a twin? There's another you at home?"

I laughed, "Yes, but we don't even look alike so save it."

There was amazement in his voice now, "You gotta look just a little bit alike."

"Not at all, she's shorter than me, thinner, darker and way meaner," I explained.

"Damn, I thought twins were supposed to be like close and shit, telling each other secrets and painting each other's nails." I cut into his words to kiss his soft lips again.

Then I said, "I know right?" Before smacking my forehead lightly, "I should never have let her be down yo, I let her tag along all the time. My first rave was with her, our first time dropping acid was together—."

He cut me off, "Rama you be droppin' acid?"

I sucked my teeth, "No, that was at like my very first rave or something I don't fuck with that garbage no more, do you?"

He laughed, "That cheap shit, no I don't."

I took a deep breath and asked, "What about heroin?"

"I did it once but I shouldn't have and I felt fucked up about it afterwards but that was like a year ago now. I never

touched that shit again tho' it's not worth it." He explained before he asked, "You don't fuck with that shit do you?"

"I never touched that shit, mad people would be shoving that shit in my face and I always stayed strong." I felt so comfortable talking to him as if I'd known him all my life there was no way that I could lie to him. I sighed and hoped that he wouldn't be turned off by my honesty, "There were plenty of times when I was broke and that's all everybody had and I'd still say no...until I moved in with Lauren—."

I looked into his beautifully curious eyes and frowned at the idea of him not liking me after he heard what I was about to say but I had to get it off my chest, "I been doing it with Lauren, like I never even knew that she did that shit until after I moved into her place. She's addicted to that shit Ryan and like when I first saw her having withdrawals I was crazy scared a—and I—I'd just never seen no shit like that before," I looked away from him. My voice was soft and defeated as I continued, "It's like every other day she wakes up screaming in pain and when she gets her fix she be steady tryna get me to do it with her."

A look of concern came over him, "You know that's playing with fire right?" He stayed quiet for a moment, "How old is she?"

I cleared my throat, "Twenty six."

"She's an adult, she should know better. Why would she even give that shit to you?" He widened his eyes, "Yo what if you're already hooked on that shit?"

I sucked my teeth, "No I'm not—at least I don't think—."

"When was the last time you did it?" He asked me.

Through squinted eyes I recalled, "Umm last night—wait no two nights ago, last night I told her I ain't want to."

"Last night you ain't do none with her?" He double-checked.

"Right, I had already decided that I didn't wanna keep fuckin with that shit. I saw how she was lookin' and I was like, yo I'd be stupid to get caught up in that shit when I'm seeing first hand what the fuck it do to you. But at the same time I really appreciate her caring about me I mean she did take me in when no one else gave a fuck," I explained.

Ryan was shaking his head at that as soon as I said it, "I care more trust me, don't think that she cares for you just cuz she said you could crash at her place." He gave me a serious look, "Why didn't you just stay with Johanna?"

"Because I didn't wanna get her and her moms caught up in my bullshit, besides that's the first place my mother woulda checked." I stopped talking and looked over at the door as it slowly creaked open and Lauren walked into the room.

We both jumped up, startled by her sudden appearance but I was more upset by her interruption of us. Apparently she thought she'd walked in on something more because her face was flushed and she looked furious. Ryan said hello to her while he put his shirt back on but he only got shot with evil glares. She turned her attention to me and got in my face yelling at the top of her lungs.

"You got fired and you didn't tell me? I gotta go to work and find out? They called me in the office and asked me if I had a drug problem like you! Then I come home and you're fucking some guy in my bed?" Her voice cracked a bit at the end.

I was shocked but when I looked back at Ryan I could see it all in his face, he found this situation hilarious, this tiny little girl all up in my face trying to act tough, I guess it was kind of funny. I knew I was wrong and there was nothing I could

really say to her besides sorry and there's no way I was about to say that. I followed Ryan's lead to the front door but before I slammed it shut I yelled behind me, "Lauren it's nothing like you're thinking, I'll talk to you when I get back. Oh yeah and chill out yo, take it down a few notches like why are you buggin' the fuck out?"

I followed Ryan down the steps and out of the building then he slipped his hand into mine and I must say, walking down the west side highway holding his hand felt incredible. We made fun of Lauren for a few blocks, I was mocking the way she'd said "In my bed!"

Ryan joked, "Nah, what really made her mad was seeing her girlfriend kissing all up on some guy."

I frowned my face, "I don't think so, she is so not my type." "She clearly likes you, tho', you don't go that way do you?" He asked unsure.

"No, I'm straight I guess, I mean I had a girlfriend once, actually we just broke up like two months ago. That's how I met Lauren—," his laughter cut into my words.

"Wait you know her through your ex-girlfriend? No wonder she wanted to kill me, did she even know you were straight before today?" He asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, I mean I think she knew," I felt a bit unsure of myself. "How do you know you're straight, maybe you're not?" He asked me as we crossed the street.

"I dunno, like when me and Leah would be making out, I'd be e'-ing all hard and shit and just knowing that the dick was missing from the equation meant that we really couldn't do much and well for me it kinda took the fun out of it. I still like fooling around with girls sometimes tho' but I'm not tryna wife 'em or nuthin'" I thought about what Jie and Eddie had told me last night, "Now that I think about it I may have

misled Lauren a little bit so she's probably gonna kick me out for sure. She got me a job with her and they fired me yesterday I just never got around to telling her about it but clearly they did."

Ryan shook his head laughing, "How'd you fuck that up?"

I watched the speeding cars pass us by while I laughed with him and waited to cross another busy street, "I ran into my friend Chris and he gave me a bag I was like tired and shit so I bumped a little on my way there. It woke me up but I needed a little bit more energy before standing at the cash register all day so after I punched in I went to the bathroom and bumped a little more. Everything woulda been fine if one of the cashiers hadn't walked in on me then she told the boss," we broke out in laughter again.

"So Lauren found this out today?" He asked.

"Yup, she must have went in to pick up her check this morning cuz we get paid today. I woulda told her yesterday but I never got the chance like as soon as I got home I found her damn near dead on the floor." I shook my head at the thought, "I can't deal with that shit."

He raised his eyebrows as he asked, "Damn she really hooked on that shit huh?"

"Yes, she gets mad sick yo, I was crying and praying for god to just like keep her alive until Shana got there with a bag." I snapped my fingers, "And just like that she was fine again but after going through all that bullshit getting fired was the furthest thing from my mind."

"You can't stay there, my girls not living in a fuckin' dope house fuck her you shouldn't have to live like that," he was adamant about it.

I placed one hand playfully on my chest and asked, "Oh I'm not living there anymore?" But the "my girl" part is what really

had me cheesing. After telling him all my secrets nothing had changed he still wanted me and although I didn't understand it, it made me feel sublime.

"No you're not sweet pea, fuck her you don't need to see her like that, she needs to go get some help. She's tryna pull you down too, you can't have that shit shoved in your face all the time you'll never be able to stop doing it that way," he explained before kissing me on my cheek. "Let's make a promise to each other not to fuck with heroin anymore."

"You mean me, if I'm not addicted already," I threw in as I lit a cigarette.

"No I mean us because I've done it before too," he explained.

With a deep inhale I said, "I'm well past you tho', I been doing it for like a month now."

I stopped walking as he stood in front of me and lifted my head up with his two fingers, "Sweet pea if you are hooked on it I'll help you kick that shit, just remember it's all in your mind, you're better than that shit." We kissed briefly before wrapping our pinkies around each other's as I made that promise to him with all my heart and he made the same promise to me.

We also promised to always be honest and tell each other if we slip up and use, then he added, "We gotta be realistic too, I mean it happens but we gotta try our hardest to resist the temptation cuz someone will always be offering."

We stopped and got bagels along the way and as we walked and ate he gave me a funny look, I laughed, "What?"

He stared at the bagel I was holding, "Tomato slices?"

"Yeah I love onion bagels with cream cheese and tomato slices," I looked over at him still walking and chewing. "It reminds me of Johanna, that's all we use to eat in the

mornings." I sighed and shook my head, "Man I miss my homegirl."

He gave my shoulder a quick squeeze, "We're bound to run into her sooner or later, I saw her like two weeks ago on 52<sup>nd</sup> St. at "Pluto"."

"You did? That rave at the Roseland Ballroom? I wanted to go to that too," I said sounding a little whiny. "Well the last time I talked to her I told her to come to "Together" so she might show up there one night, I'll be so happy," I smiled at the thought as we entered Washington Square Park.

We sat on an empty bench and fixed our eyes on the performers by the fountain. There was a guy playing a djembe while another guy was showing everyone what his highly advanced pet monkey could do.

We laughed and clapped along with the other on lookers than I told him, "I need to be on this side of town anyway cuz this is where my jobs at and I still gotsta pick up my check." I leaned forward resting my elbows on my knees and placing my chin in my hands still watching the adorable little monkey.

Ryan raised his eyebrows, "You get paid today?"

"Yup yup, sure do and one more time after that, that check won't be a full week like this one tho'. I really don't wanna have to see them, I feel so embarrassed and I know they all know what happened," I explained sadly.

"Where'd you work at?" He asked me curiously.

I sat up straight shielding my eyes from the sun with one hand and pointing in the direction of my former job with the other, "It's down that way a few blocks, it's this fancy little grocery store called The Jefferson Market."

He looked in that direction, "Oh one of them stores that be havin' all that exotic shit?"

I giggled, "Uh huh, like goat cheese and all that shit."

"After we pick up your check we still gotta kill time until this party tonight but I'll definitely be able to find us a place to crash up in there." He lit a cigarette and passed it to me then he lit another for himself.

"We're gonna have to go back to Laurens for my bags I always keep them packed so we'll just be in and out and I'll give her back her key." I took a drag of my cigarette and scratched my head at that complication, "Do you think she'll get mad when I tell her that I'm out?"

He leaned back and blew out a puff of smoke before he spoke again, "She might start crying like," he attempted to imitate Lauren's voice, "No Rama, please don't go."

We laughed, "Yeah right." My eyes went to the pigeons that were eating up all the bread a little old lady had left for them when she'd passed by.

"You got a lot of bags?" Ryan asked me and when I looked over at him he was watching the pigeons eat their bread just as I'd been.

I held my hand out in front of me to get a better look at my chipped magenta nails and started to pick at them, "Nope, I travel light." Then I wiggled two of my fingers playfully, "I only gots two bags." After staring at everything in the park my eyes wondered to the building across the street, "What's that right there is that like a part of NYU or sumthin'?"

Ryan looked in the same direction, "Yeah, I think that's the dorms."

I sighed folding my arms, "I always liked that university, they were at my high school once well a bunch of schools were there. I talked to someone from FIT and they were really nice and loved my portfolio. I always wanted to go there, but that ain't happenin'" I pressed my back into the bench and folded my arms.

He sucked his teeth, “Why not? You could go there.”

His positivity made me choke on the cigarette smoke that I was in the process of exhaling, “C’mom now how in the world could I do that when I have the worst grades ever, yeah she liked my fashion designs but those are just drawings. I mean I never did any school work all I ever did was fight so I was suspended most of the time.”

“Really, you don’t look like a fighter but you’re a little troublemaker huh?” He asked with peculiar eyes.

“Well I actually hate fighting I just had no choice in the matter. Bitches wouldn’t stop tryin’ me so I had to do what I had to do,” I said innocently.

He put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a big smile, “But that’s why you ain’t do good in school not cuz you couldn’t do it, you had mad other shit going on. If you tried you could do it.”

I smiled back, “See that’s the thing tho’ I don’t wanna try no more, like I really hate my life that much.” I looked over at him, “Seriously Ryan I gave up on life a long time ago.”

He returned my stare, “Why?”

Through an uncomfortable chuckle I said, “I don’t know, I guess because no one ever loved me, not the way I wanted them to, ya know? But I’m a big girl, like I wasn’t all poor me all the time and shit I accepted that life is what it is—” I cut myself off and shook my head. I flicked my cigarette butt onto the ground, “Umm like at times it hurts so bad that it’s kinda like a stabbing pain in my heart. It’s always been like that ever since I was a chubby faced little girl playin’ with my Barbie dolls.” Don’t cry I told myself as I gave him a defeated look, “That’s no way to live.” I took a deep breath and looked off in the distance, “Always wanting to die—.” He interrupted

my sob story by uniting our lips and we kissed for quite some time inhaling his air as he exhaled mine.

He pulled away just enough to look into my eyes and when he spoke the warmth of his breath caressed my face, “I love you sweet pea, like I don’t have to wait weeks or years to know that. I know me and I just feel completely different with you.”

“I love you too and it may seem immature or whatever but I just know, ya know. Like life seemed so fucked up to me and then I met you, just being with you feels so damn good, it’s mad crazy yo,” I slid my hand into his.

“You don’t have to feel like nobody loves you or whatever no more, aiight,” he gave my hand a squeeze and smiled at me.

“Hey, I was thinking since neither one of us has a pager we should pick a place to meet up just for in case we ever lose each other.” Now that I could no longer see my life without him in it I damn sure didn’t want to lose him.

He nodded his head in agreement, “Let’s make this our bench right here and whenever we’re at this park this ‘ull be like our chill spot.” He patted the green weathered wooden bench lightly.

I gave him a big smile loving the romantics of it all as I added, “Okay and this is our park too.”

He nodded, “Yeah Washington Square Park is ours and The Roxy too.”

“Yeah, that’s where we met so from now on The Roxy’s our spot,” I laughed and watched the park fill up with interesting people. We chilled and took it all in while talking about everything under the sun, laughing and chain smoking until the day got later.

It was mid-afternoon when we finally left the park taking our sweet time walking to my former job. I pulled the glass door open and Ryan followed me inside all the cashiers were staring at me probably thinking *there goes that druggy Rama*. I'm sure they all heard the story by now but Ryan stayed by my side the entire time so it didn't bother me one bit. When the manager saw me he rushed into the back for a moment then returned holding my check in his hand. He shook his head in disappointment as he held the envelope out toward me. With the roll of my eyes I snatched it and turned my lip up at the nosy cashiers while their eyes followed me back out the door. When we hit the pavement I tore the envelope open and peeked inside then I said sarcastically, "Wow two hundred and three whole dollars."

Ryan added to my sarcasm, "Damn don't spend it all in one place."

After waiting in a long line at the bank I'd cashed my check and we wound up strolling down Broadway window shopping for a while. Eventually we decided to go to the movies and settled on watching a popcorn spilling horror flick.

The sun had set by the time we left the theater and rode the subway back to Laurens. I could feel myself getting a little anxious as we approached the stairwell I walked up the steps, pulled my key out and smiled at Ryan nervously. When I unlocked the door and pushed it open Lauren jumped up from the couch where she'd been sitting with Shana, it was obvious that they'd been waiting for me.

My eyes darted to my two bags that were now sitting against the wall in the kitchen and that's when I knew that they'd already planned on kicking me out tonight. I was in disbelief as I yelled, "I can't believe this, Lauren you're really kicking me out on the street? Why? Because I have a boyfriend? Is

that a fuckin' crime?" I pushed past her and yanked my bags up off of the floor placing one over my shoulder and holding the other one toward her as I said furiously, "How you gonna touch my shit?" She didn't answer me or even look at me for that matter, "I was coming here to get my bags and move out anyways you strung out bitch!"

I heard Ryan's voice say, "C'mon Rama fuck her, she was never a real friend to begin with."

Shana jumped up visibly upset by his words, "No, you don't know what you're talking about Rama is the one who's not a good fucking friend." She snapped her head in my direction and pointed a finger at me, "You brought another guy into her bed."

"Well excuse me I guess I was the only one who didn't know Lauren wanted to fuck me!" I turned away from Shana and looked back at Lauren, "That's fucking gross, why would I get with you I'm only sixteen for one and you're old as shit. For two you look like a fuckin' zombie bitch, I'm dead serious yo. You look like you could drop dead at any muthafuckin' second." My blood was boiling, I had intentions on leaving tonight anyway but I wanted it be on my own terms.

Shana seemed to not hear any of my words as she kept going, "Oh sure Laurens not a good friend but those guys Chris and Shane are? That's what kind of people you call good friends right?"

I was surprised by that I didn't even know that she knew so much information about me. She read my eyes and gave me a cold smirk while she kept on going, "Yeah your so called friends who just left you here in a fuckin' coma, Lauren thought that you were dead until we felt your pulse. We still didn't know if you were going to eventually die on us and frankly we have better things to do than worry about teenage

runaways overdosing in our apartment." They'd obviously been talking shit about me in my absence and I could feel my face getting flushed as she continued.

"Yeah you got some nerve to talk after she took your ass in," Shana pointed at Ryan. "You don't even know this dude and you bring him into our home like a fuckin' slut," she ended her words with a raised voice.

Ryan looked at Lauren with irritation on his face, "Why is she talking for you? She's not Rama's friend you are, right?"

Laurens eyes were stuck to the floor when she finally said something, "I just want Rama to leave, I told her she could stay here if she kept a job and she got fired so she's out."

I whipped my head toward Lauren and blurted out, "Who the fuck are you talking to Lauren, me or the muthfuckin' floor? Why you need Shana to speak for you? That's some corney ass shit right there." I turned my attention back to Shana feeling like she was really trying me now and I was just a few seconds away from punching her dead in her face. I took a deep breath, walked up to her and spoke through my teeth with my finger shoved into her temple, "Fuck you, you twenty five and ain't amount to nuthin' but a paranoid cokehead ya damn self, you's a fuckin' loser bitch." I laughed at her before adding, "Oh wait my bad, I'm suppose to respect my elder's right?" She stopped making eye contact with me and backed away, she must have known how close I was to hitting her.

When she was a good distance away she cleared her throat and spoke calmly, "Just give us back our house key and leave Rama." Her hand was out palm up waiting for my key and I noticed that it was trembling slightly.

I took the palm of my hand and pushed it into her scrawny shoulder as I passed her and headed toward the door. My eyes caught Laurens but she quickly looked away, I could tell

that she felt bad but it was a little too late for that. I rolled my eyes at her just before I turned and threw my key at Shana's head. Her reflexes were pretty quick because she was able to dodge it, I had nothing else to throw at her but words so I threw those too, "Yo, you're fuckin' coo coo!"

We walked back down the steps of Laurens apartment building for the last time. The night air felt cool on my flushed face and I inhaled it deeply as I shook my head and looked over at Ryan, "I ain't think Lauren would do me like that."

"Why'd you let them get you so mad?" Ryan asked taking one of my bags from me and tossing it over his shoulder.

"Because think about it, if I didn't have you and she did this shit to me where would I be right now? She told me she'd have my back as long as I was out here, like what did I do that was so terrible? I mean c'mon now, I coulda found another job," a tear escaped my eye and I brushed it away.

"Don't let that get to you, just be happy you got out of that mad house. That bitch asked you to sniff dope with her like every night, that's how she looks out for you? She played herself," he let out a deep sigh re-adjusting my backpack on his shoulders.

I couldn't help but sigh right along with him, "True that."

We stopped at the street corner and while we waited for the traffic light to change I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him.

The pedestrian crossing light finally changed, the traffic stopped abruptly and bright headlights shined on us as we walked in front of them. Ryan let out a quick laugh, "Did you see Shana's face when she thought you were gonna hit her?"

I giggled and playfully punched my right fist into the palm of my left hand, "I wanted to punch that bitch so bad, you

don't even know." I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket and placed it in my mouth, "You gotta light?"

He pulled a lighter out of his pocket, "When you pushed her I thought it was about to go down." He added before lighting my cigarette.

When we got across the street I pointed to the steps leading underground as we passed them, "Actually we could just catch this train right here to Brooklyn so I can leave my bags at Chris and Shane's." I passed my cigarette to him, "I'm sure we could even stay there if we wanted to."

Gray smoke exited his mouth as he spoke, "The two guys that according to Shana left you to die?"

I sucked my teeth, "Shana made it sound worse than it was I mean I was pretty mad about that myself but Chris showed up yesterday all apologizing and shit."

He seemed bewildered, "That's the same guy who got you fired?"

I laughed, "Well he gave it to me as like a peace offering I mean how could he know I was gonna do it at work."

He turned his face up, "What, does he like you or sumthin?"

I sucked my teeth, "No Chris and Shane are both in their twenties and I've known them since I first started raving. They are more like my big brothers, Shane has had the same girlfriend since I've known him. Besides they think that I like girls," I explained in an attempt to stop him from completely disliking two of my closest friends, but it didn't work.

"Aye if you wanna go there let's go but I ain't tryna be there long cuz these kids sound like assholes to me. They shouldn'a never let you stay with Lauren why didn't you just stay with them," he said as we started walking back to the subway.

"I couldn't stay with them cuz my twin knows where they live at even though no one woulda came looking for me. They

don't care, shit I'm out here on the streets of New York and they don't even give a fuck if I'm dead or alive."I playfully poked my lip out, "I was mad when Shane told me no but fuck it, I mean no one's obligated to give a fuck."

"I give a fuck," he said before tapping out his cigarette on the brick wall behind him. Then he placed the half smoked cigarette back inside its pack before looking at me, "You sure they're home?"

I nodded, "Pretty sure, and I think they're going to the same rave as us tonight." He grabbed my hand and held it tight as we headed down the subway steps.

## 6.

After knocking a few times Tara appeared on the opposite side of the door, the way her humongous clothes hung made her appear thinner than she actually was. She smiled and stepped aside, “What’s up Rama come in.”

“What’s up Tara,” I said and hugged her briefly. I held my hand out toward Ryan, “This is my boyfriend Ryan.”

“Hi,” she said as she hugged him.

He pulled away and really looked at her through squinted eyes, “Yo, you’re Jenna’s cousin right?”

Tara smiled and hugged him again, “Yeah, I knew I recognized you.”

I spotting Shane and Chris sitting on the couch already getting high and they motioned for me to come over to them. I did but first I took my bag from Ryan and sat both of them down on the cluttered kitchen table.

Chris had white powder lined out on a magazine that sat on his lap, “What up Fajita, where you been at?” He asked me sniffing with every word.

“You won’t believe what just happened yo, Lauren just straight kicked me out.” Then I pointed to Ryan who’d just turned a chair away from their messy table and sat down. “Guys, this is my man, Ryan.” Shane and Chris said what’s up to him and he nodded hello back as I sat down in-between them.

Chris held their rolled up dollar out toward me, I took it and asked, "What ya'll sniffin' on?"

I could see that Chris's pupils were dilated and his nose was red as he said, "K."

I handed the straw back to him, "No thanks, I wanna be alert tonight that shit be having me acting straight stupid, you ain't got no glass or nuthin'?"

Shane sniffed long and hard, "Umm Tara got some I think." Then he looked past me and yelled, "Tara hook Fajita up with some of that shit babe."

Tara yelled for me from the bedroom so I hopped off the couch and looked at Chris, "I know ya'll got beer in this bitch lemme get one."

"It's in the fridge," Chris pointed in that direction.

I went over to the fridge and grabbed two beers sitting one in front of Ryan as Shane asked him, "Yo Ryan you want some k' man?"

I watched Ryan shake his head no before I asked him, "You wanna bump some crystal with me and Tara?"

He shook his head once more and cracked open his can of beer as I headed into the bedroom. Even though I was still getting to know him I could tell he wasn't the type of guy that liked to do other peoples drugs. Although that's never stopped me he was a bit more cautious and responsible.

I could hear Chris ask Ryan, "Yo, why'd Lauren kick Fajita out?" As I stopped dead in my tracks with my eyes stuck on Shane's messy bed, "Ya'll need to straighten up in here, damn." I sat my beer on the dresser, pushed some clothes aside and tossed a pillow out the way then I climbed on the bed. Tara pulled out a tiny clear vial of white powder and poured some onto her thumb knuckle I sniffed the first bump and she sniffed the other. Then I reached across the bed and

took a few more sips of my drink before grabbing a hairbrush off the nightstand.

Still sniffling I asked, “You want me to do your hair?”

She tucked the vile back into her pocket and lightly scratched the tip of her nose, “Hell yeah, hook me up girl. Hey, you’re still going out tonight right?”

“No doubt, are you wearing your visor?” Tara sat on the floor with her back against the bed and I slid to the edge right behind her.

She pointed to the left and there it was hanging from a hook, “You know I stay rockin’ that shit.”

I laughed as I brushed her silky, chestnut hair, “I’mma give you a french braid that’ll look cute with your visor.”

“Hook me up girl,” she said before she lit a Marlboro. After a few drags she spoke again, “You guys make a cute couple.”

“Thanks,” I said paying close attention to her hair as I began to braid it. “I had no idea that you and Ryan knew each other.”

She blew more smoke out, “Yeah, he’s mad cool, he deserves someone nice like you. He use to date Jenna’s boyfriend’s sister but that didn’t last long.”

“Joey has a sister?” I asked in a surprised voice.

Tara let out a little giggle, “No, this was last year Jenna use to go out with this kid Gabe and his sister Jessica was going with Ryan. She was so conceited though, I couldn’t stand that bitch and Gabe turned out to be the same way. That’s why Jenna ended up dropping his ass like a bad habit.”

She’d struck my curiosity, “Do you know what happened with Ryan and Jessica? Why’d they break up?”

“While everyone was still dating we’d gotten pretty cool with Ryan plus it was obvious that his relationship with Jessica was going nowhere. Then that bitch tried to fight Jenna it’s a long story but after Jenna dissed Gabe Jessica

was all mad about it. She threw her drink on us one night at the club and Jenna smacked the shit out that bitch. Ryan held Jessica back and wouldn't let them fight then he basically told her to go fuck herself. He had our backs that night that's why we gots mad love for him." She cleared her throat, "He's a good guy, that's what you need plus you guys look mad cute together."

I giggled as I finished up her braid, "Thanks, —wait so what, he cut her off that night?"

"Uh huh, he sure did, she felt dumb as shit too," she added proudly.

We both laughed, "I'm done, check it out in the mirror." She stood up and grabbed her visor I helped her place it over her new doo then she looked in the mirror. I gave her a playful push, "You look fly bitch!" She agreed and we let out a few giggles before our attention went to the loud voices coming from the other room.

Tara and I exchanged confused glances before hurrying out the bedroom where I saw Ryan and Chris standing in the middle of the living room arguing. Shane was in the middle of them trying to calm them down and without a second thought I forced myself in between them as well. My back was up against Shane's when I pushed Ryan away from Chris with all my might but he barely budged. He had a beer in one hand and even though he was so busy yelling at Chris that I couldn't look into his eyes he was visibly upset.

While Chris was yelling, "Yo, I've known Fajita for like ever bro' and in all that time she never had a boyfriend she did have a girlfriend tho', ya heard? I hate to be the one to tell you man but that means she don't like dudes, I know that shit for a fact."

I turned away from Ryan and got in Chris's face folding my arms in frustration, "Why don't you just mind your business Chris? You got shit twisted."

He pounded on his chest clearly fucked up beyond the point of reasoning but with Chris that was an everyday occurrence. He stared at me through glassy red eyes and said, "Yo, this dude is trying to fuck with our friendship Fajita."

Ryan jumped in before I could open my mouth, "I'm fuckin' with your friendship? The last time she hung out with you she got fired and the time before that ya'll gave her mad uppers and downers and left her to die. You fucked up ya'll friendship I ain't have nothing to do with that." He shook his head at them as guilt came across Chris and Shane's faces then he rub it in, "Man, her heart coulda exploded off that shit!"

Chris's face was fiery and he was sweating, "We were fucked up that night too kid." Chris lightly pushed me aside to get back in Ryan's face, "Fajita can stay here but you gotta get the fuck out, that's my little sister right there regardless of what the fuck you think." Chris snapped his head back at me, "I don't want you dating this kid he's a fuckin' dick."

Ryan was yelling over me at the same time, "You callin' her your little sister but yet you let her live with a dopehead?" He added in as much sarcasm as he could now, "Yeah that's love."

I grabbed Chris's arm and pulled him back, "Get out of his face Chris like why are you giving my man a hard time? He has every right to catch feelings behind that shit but I'm still here, I didn't die and I'm not mad at nobody so dead that shit already!"

Ryan looked at Chris with coldness in his green eyes, "You can't tell her who the fuck she can be with."

Tara cut in yelling at the top of her lungs, “Please just drop it guys.” Then she stood by me, “Rama why don’t you guys just stay with me?”

I looked at Ryan as I spoke and he finally saw me again, “She lives all the way in Sayville, Long Island baby, wanna stay there?”

Tara looked at him too, “You’re cool peoples fuck the bullshit.”

Ryan’s anger suddenly vanished, “Good lookin’ out Tara.”

“No doubt, as a matter of fact ya’ll wanna ride with me to the club? Cuz we can get the fuck outta here right now,” she held her arms out to show us that she was ready then she grabbed her keys off the disheveled table.

I nodded yes as Ryan sat his empty beer can down and grabbed my bags then I followed him out the front door never looking back. Tara yelled behind her, “Shane I’ll meet you there babe.”

The rave was in a warehouse in Brooklyn, we walked inside to see the dimly lit place packed with kids from wall to wall either socializing or going off on the dance floor. Strobe lights were blinking off and on while different colored laser lights reflected off the mirrored disco ball that hung directly in the middle of the dance floor. The air was a bit smoggy thanks to the fog machine mixed with all the cigarette smoke floating about but I could still make out the disc jockey’s booth at the opposite end. He was fully focused on his turntables as he placed the needle on the record and kept the jungle blasting. The word was that a special kind of ecstasy called chocolate chip cookie was going around tonight and on our drive here Tara had expressed how much she’d wanted to try it so Ryan walked off to find us some.

We continued toward the dance floor and Tara ran into her cousin Jenna we greeted one another and danced for a while. Ryan was taking longer than expected so I walked off to see if I could find him strategically moving through the crowd as I made my way to the water stand. I could see him standing there and I waved to him but he didn't notice me a few seconds later a tall girl approached him and took his attention. He leaned forward speaking into her ear before reaching in his pocket and quickly passing something to her the girl handed him something in return then she walked away. He watched her for a spell but his eyes caught sight of me eventually and he headed my way. He was holding two bottled waters and he gave me one half of an e' pill he kept the other and we swallowed them down.

I led him to where Tara and Jenna were and Ryan placed a pill in Tara's hand before embracing Jenna. He asked Tara for her car keys and she handed them over, he shoved the keys in his pocket while he got close to my ear, "C'mon I want you to meet some friends of mine."

Hand and hand he led me around the party and when we reached a group of kids I immediately recognized one of the guys from the other night. Ryan pulled me close as he introduced me to him, "Rama this is my boy Brian."

Brian smiled and gave me a hug but it wasn't warm like most ravers and he didn't make eye contact with me either. I got a weird vibe from him as if he didn't care to know me at all but Ryan didn't seem to notice as he kept talking, "Yo Brian, I need to get my bags out the trunk of your car."

"Want to do it now?" Brian asked him.

Ryan nodded yes and introduced me to the two other people that were also standing with Brian before saying,

"Stay here with them I'll be right back, I'm just gonna move my shit from his trunk to Tara's right quick."

I gave him a nod of understanding as he kissed my cheek and left me in their company. I watched him walk away with Brian and to my delight they were very friendly conversing with me almost immediately.

After the party was over we drove back into Manhattan to the after party that was held in a smaller space. There wasn't a line of people at the door and when we walked inside it wasn't extremely dark. Ambient house music was being spun by the DJ unaccompanied by fancy lights just the occasional flash of a soft strobe. There weren't half as many kids here as the rave we'd just left but everyone was vibing and it all molded into a chill atmosphere.

We ran right back into Brian and his friends who spotted us immediately and were signaling for Ryan to come over to them. At the same time Tara pulled on my shirt and pointed Shane and Chris out, I hadn't noticed right away but they were dancing in a dark corner way in the back with a group of friends.

Ryan got close to me, "I'mma go talk to Brian for a minute."

I nudged my head toward Shane, "Kay, I'mma see what's up with them."

Tara and I walked to one side of the dance floor and Ryan walked to the other, Chris spotted us and yelled out our names as we approached. He came toward me and when we hugged he lifted me off the floor then Shane squeezed in hugging me too. They told me that they had come from The Palladium and Chris showed me a flyer, "Yo, this party ends at noon, you should come to the after after party with me."

I read the front and back of it then gave it back, "Nah I ain't tryna stay up all day. I took my book bag off and sat it in the

middle of our circle then I asked Chris, “Yo you got any baby powder in ya bag?”

Chris pulled out his powder and sprinkled it on the worn dance floor in front of me then I slid into my dance but our ecstasial state had us feeling dehydrated and we were ready to leave after only a few songs. It was decided that Shane would need to drive Tara’s car since he was the least fucked up and Chris stayed behind with his friend’s. We gave out scattered goodbye hugs and collected a few more party flyers then Ryan, Tara, Shane and I all walked out together.

Tara’s place was further into the island than Ryan expected because he commented that he’d never been that far out before. We finally got to her place and I complimented Tara on the cute décor in the guestroom. Mostly everything was white and the bed had a picket fence headboard that made the room feel like a cozy little country cottage. Tara lent me a pair of her sweatpants and a t-shirt before we told her goodnight, I laughed when I heard Shane yell goodnight Fajita. “Goodnight Shane,” I yelled back through the wall. I looked around again and said, “Baby, this feels like it could be our honey moon suite.”

“Yeah, it’s mad nice,” he agreed while he emptied the contents of his pockets placing it all on the nightstand before lying down.

I gathered up my flyers and shoved them inside my backpack that’s when I discovered the twenty bag of crystal I’d gotten for Lauren the other night. It was tucked inside one of the small compartments, I held it in the air, “Oh shit, I forgot I had this.”

Ryan sat up catching the baggie I’d just thrown to him, “You still feeling your e’?”

I smiled, my eyes reduced to two pleasingly thin lines, “Hells yeah.”

“Me too,” he poured some crystal onto his knuckle.

Pulling his hand toward my face I sniffed the pearly pink powder off his knuckles. My hand went to my nose instantly and a single tear ran down my face, I could never get use to that sting, “Oh my god that shit burns so fuckin’ bad.”

Ryan wiped at his nose with his hand, “Is this pink champagne?”

“Why yes it is,” I told him playfully then I glanced out the window. “Look baby the sun is rising, sunrise and sunset are the only times god lets you get a sneak peek at the spirit world ya know.”

He looked out the window with me, “I never heard that one before, is that what Muslims believe?”

“No, I’m Muslim because it’s what I know not because it’s what I believe. My belief is whatever my heart says when it speaks to me and whatever my eyes see since they can’t lie to me. The immaculateness of the sky right now how enchanted it looks, that’s what I believe.”

He raised an eyebrow, “So that’s how eternity looks?”

I held my hands out toward the sky, “Well it’s like this but like ten times better our minds wouldn’t be able to handle that knowledge. If everyone knew that the afterlife was so awesome they’d all kill themselves like immediately.”

When he laughed the sun was on its way up to the sky and turning his eyes to polished emeralds while it passed us by. He slid his hand into mine and kissed the back of it, “You can’t feel depressed on e’ right?”

I could stare at his face for the rest of my life but I pulled myself out of his trance sniffling and giggling as I said, “Nah not when I’m on e’ but any other time it’s always there, it just

never gets any better. Like it'll leave me alone for awhile but when it creeps up again it's just as powerful as it ever was." A grin crept across my face as I lay backward onto the bed and tucked my hands underneath my head, "Once I snuck into Shana's bedroom and took her loaded gun out of her top draw and held it to my head."

We were quiet for awhile but my mind was running all over the place while I stared at the ceiling ablaze with the suns golden orange shadow. After a deep sigh I added, "I pulled the trigger but that shit wasn't even loaded."

Ryan smoothly ran his fingers across the side of my face and when he finally spoke again his words pierced the silence, "If it was loaded we would have never met." He lay back onto the bed beside me and we turned to face each other, "When you approached me that night I was happy as hell, I'd wanted to talk to you since the first time I ever saw you."

"Oh yeah, and when was that?" I challenged.

He placed a hand on my cheek and kissed my forehead, "At the Newburgh Skate Park, I saw you there with Johanna but she wasn't fuckin' with my brother no more." He chuckled to himself, "I remember thinking that I should just say what's up to Johanna and maybe that'll get your attention. But she ain't really know me like that and I ain't know if she was mad at Greg or what." He laughed again to himself, "I ain't want her to be like what does this kid want? Get the fuck out my face or some shit like that."

My eyes popped out in disbelief, "At the skate park? You skate? There's never that many people when I skate there, I woulda seen you without a doubt."

His eyes scrunched up as he laughed at me, "Nah I mean I saw you at a rave they had there, I don't skate." He pointed at

me with surprise in his eyes as what I said finally dawned on him, “Hey, you skateboard?”

“Yeah, well not lately but I use to like every day.” I placed my hand on his chest finally understanding what he’d been saying, “Oh you mean, at one of the raves they had there?” He nodded and I sighed again, “Well you know what they say, everyone only remembers like their first hour of a rave right? Shit I barely remember last night.”

He laughed before asking, “Wow, you skate? There’s not a lot of female skaters, like you can do tricks and shit?”

I giggled, “Yeah, I use to fall off my board and get fucked up a lot but once I got my balance I learned how to do nose slides, kick flips all that shit in no time.”

“Damn, that’s hard as shit! That takes time and dedication,” he gave me a reassuring smile and gently rubbed my arm. “So you already know that if you put your heart into something you’ll succeed at it.”

I closed one eye and rubbed my chin playfully, “So what you’re saying is if getting a degree in fashion was a skateboard I’d rock at it?”

He laughed, “Exactly.”

I gave him a quick wink, “I might just give that shit a try.”

After staring at me for a minute he said, “You’re so pretty.” Then he stroked my hair, “Yo I was steady braggin’ to everyone I ran into last night. I was like Rama’s my girl now, Oh you ain’t know? Nothin’ more needed to be said, they were too busy giving me my props and shit. Oh yeah yo, you know mad people too.”

I sucked my teeth at that, “Shit so do you, I met a lot of new people last night and come to find out all of ‘em already knew you. Like I’d be telling them how I came with my man then they’d wanna know who. So I’d be like do you know Ryan

from upstate and the first thing everyone would say was, ““Who Ryan and Brian?”” We laughed, “I’m dead serious, that’s the next thing they’d say then I’d be like yeah that’s the one. Everyone said that you’re cool peoples.” He smiled at that so I continued, “Oh yeah, Jenna and Tara said we look mad cute together and Alexia said that our dance styles really compliment one another.”

He laughed, “Damn you skateboard and you’re a badass dancer.”

“Umm you mean we are badass dancers,” I joked as I did a quick liquid dance with my hands. “I bet if we take all the kids you know and all the kids I know we probably know the whole scene.”

“At least in the tri-state area,” he pulled me close and gave me another kiss then I pulled him closer and kissed him longer. In his arms everything that was wrong felt right again and something within me had disappeared for the first time in my life, my loneliness.

## 7.

I found myself yelling, “No!” When I awoke from my sleep and a shiver ran through my body as I sat up. I frowned when I touched my forehead and realized that I’d been sweating and that’s when my dream came flooding back to me. Tears came rolling down my cheeks and as I wiped them away a stabbing pain shot through my stomach, a scream wanted to escape from my mouth as well but I managed to hold it in. When I looked over at Ryan he was pushing himself up on his elbows and blinking away his weariness.

“You okay?” His voice was dry while he rubbed his face with his hand.

I grabbed my stomach, “No I don’t feel good at all.” I tossed the covers off me and hurried to the bathroom as the feeling of nausea rushed in. I couldn’t stop throwing up over and over again until there was nothing left in my stomach. Ryan sat on the edge of the bathtub gently rubbing my back and I was hunched over the toilet dry heaving.

We both looked at the door when Tara knocked, “Rama what’s wrong?” She asked after Ryan let her in.

Once Ryan explained everything to her she stayed with me and told him to take her car and get some canned soup and aspirin from the store. She kept suggesting that I drink some water before walking away and returning with a glass

of it. I took it from her and we both couldn't help but notice the unsteadiness of my hands as I drank it down. I felt out of breath afterwards but I still managed to say, "Thanks, I think that helped." I stayed on the bathroom floor afraid to move too far from the toilet sitting my glass down beside me, "Did Shane leave already?"

"Yeah, he left a few hours ago," Tara answered with a sympathetic look on her face. "Do you think it was something that you ate?"

I shook my head still feeling short of breath, "I don't know, I—." I stopped talking and threw the water I'd just drunk back up.

Tara thought it might help if I took a valium so I did and went back to bed, Ryan woke me up with a bowl of hot soup but I told him I didn't want any before pulling the covers over my head. I don't know how much time had passed but the sounds of my own screams had pulled me out of the nightmare I was in. Ryan came running into the room and I started to cry uncontrollably his face was covered in concern as I looked at him through my watery eyes. He sat next to me hugging me tight as he spoke softly into my ear, "I think you're going through withdrawals sweet pea."

I buried my face in his shoulder and his shirt absorbed my tears while he held me close. When I regained my composure I sat up straight sniffling and wiping my tears away with my sleeve.

"Sweet pea you haven't eaten anything in almost two days," he got up from the bed. "I'll be right back."

Just as he walked out the cramps set in again, I sat up hugging my aching stomach until he returned. He had a cup of water in one hand and a sandwich in the other, it smelled like peanut butter and jelly but I couldn't be sure.

"You have to try to eat something," he explained while he sat the plate on the nightstand and handed me two small pills. "Take these for your pain."

I took the aspirins from him and drank them down with the water he'd given me then I grabbed the sandwich. My voice was weak as I spoke, "How can I be withdrawin' from dope already, it's only been like four days since the last time I did any."

He gave me a caring smile, "Sometimes that's all it takes, this is the longest you've went without doing that shit so you wouldn't have known until now."

I looked at the sandwich, "I really can't eat anything." I sat it back on the plate and burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably once again.

He dropped beside me, "You can do this okay, be strong Rama." Then he pulled me close and rested his chin on the top of my head.

I pressed the side of my face into his chest, "Oh my god I can't believe this shit is happening to me. Please don't tell me I'm gonna be suffering like Lauren, I can't go through that."

He stroked my hair and spoke softly, "Nah, this isn't gonna last any longer than like a week, not even. Now Lauren on the other hand can't kick that shit without methadone but you haven't been doing it long enough to need that shit."

Once I gained some control over my sorrow I spoke again, "Ryan I'm really glad you told me to stop...I really don't know what the fuck I was thinking?"

He cleared his throat, "You decided to stop fuckin' with that shit all on your own sweet pea and I want you to always remember that. Like you claim you hated yaself but yet you made that choice way before we even met that night...you know what that tells me?"

I smiled liking where he was going with this, “What?” The hoarseness in my voice surprised me.

“That you do love yourself you just wanna believe that you don’t cuz the doctors beat that shit in your head for so long. But you can see from your own actions that it can’t be true, someone who wants to die doesn’t give a fuck about nuthin?” He explained.

An aching pain shot through my body and I cried out in agony, “Oh my god, my body hurts so bad.”

“Don’t worry baby it’ll be over soon, I promise,” he wiped the beads of sweat that were forming on my forehead and kissed me there. “I’m proud of you.”

Another pain shot through me and I squeezed his arm praying that it would pass quickly but unfortunately it didn’t. My head was still glued to his chest and in a defeated whisper said, “I think I’m dying, I’m not getting any better Ryan it’s getting worse. I just feel like I need to do a little bit and sorta wean myself off, ya know what I mean? Yeah, yeah that’s what I think I need to do it won’t be so painful that way,” another chill ran through my bones and Ryan messaged my back but remained silent I eventually gave his arm a weak smack, “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

He lifted my head up and pressed his forehead against my temple as he spoke calmly, “I just want you to feel better sweet pea.”

“Please find me some dope then, please baby I just wanna do like a line that’s it, I just don’t know where to get that shit from out here. Please Ryan I’m in so much pain right now you don’t even know, why don’t you ask Tara if she knows anybody.” I was beginning to sound like a whinny child but I couldn’t help it, “I need it Ryan.” I wept and grabbed at my stomach again.

He was back to his silent mode again and after a few minutes I gave up and lay back down. He lay behind me holding me tight as he pressed his cheek against mine. The warmth of his body felt as comforting as a blanket and after a few minutes he whispered, “If you keep doin’ it it’ll just get worse, I know it’s really painful and uncomfortable but you’ll feel better soon. At least you’re not throwing up anymore, is the aspirin working at all?”

I placed my hand over his and squeezed it thankfully, “Yeah the pain in my stomach is not so intense anymore.” Tears slid down the side of my face, “Ryan I can’t believe I did this to myself.”

“You fucked up, that’s all. We all fuck up every now and then.” His voice got softer, “Rama, you gotta take your mind off it, let’s talk about something else okay.”

I grabbed a cigarette and the lighter off the nightstand and turned on my back, “Like what?” I mumbled.

He was silent for a moment watching me smoke my cigarette, “When you wake up screaming what are you dreaming about?”

I inhaled deeply admiring the way the silver moonlight crept in through the blinds illuminating the smoke as I blew it into the air. Although my pain had passed I still felt anxious and fatigued but I was grateful for this moment of peace. My voice was scratchy when I finally spoke, “I normally don’t dream at all but lately I’ve had some real disturbing ones.”

He spoke carefully, “When you woke up you had this look in your eyes for a second like I dunno, like you were petrified.”

I let out a weak sigh, “I—I was dreaming about something real fucked up that’s why it wasn’t even a dream...a fuckin’ nightmare.”

He sat up and I lay my head on his lap as I looked into his eyes, "What happened?"

My eyes fixed themselves on the placid moonlight that painted the ceiling as I spoke again, "N—nothing I—I ummm." I took a deep breath and spit my words out, "Last year when I was fifteen this guy raped me."

He frowned, "What, for real? That's fucked up."

"I was babysitting my oldest sister's son and after I'd put him to sleep in his crib I watched some TV and ended up falling asleep on her sofa. I—I woke up to a gun pointed at me." I pushed my cigarette into the bottom of the ashtray as I blew out the last of my smoke, "He told me not to move so I didn't, it was my sister's boyfriend's cousin and he was like forty or something, visiting from out of town." I made a yucky face, "He was tall, fat and disgusting."

Ryan caressed my cheek, "What? I'm sorry that happened to you yo, you don't have to talk about it, I'm sorry."

I looked up into his eyes and gave him an exhausted smile, "No it's okay."

He frowned studying my face as he said, "I wish that never happened to you, you didn't do anything wrong."

"You know what's so funny," a tear ran away from me. "There was no way he could have got in her apartment unless she gave him her key."

"You told your mom?" He asked.

"No, I didn't tell anyone I mean it was my sister's boyfriend's cousin and I just felt like no one would believe me...at that time that would have hurt me more." I gazed at the glowing ceiling again deep in thought for a moment, "That's my big sis, ya know, I trusted her just like I trusted her when I was thirteen. I'd come home from school...I was so happy that day until I walked in my front door she was in the living room

sitting on the couch with this really hot guy. The same guy we'd just talked about the night before when I told her how cute I thought he was but I'd never imagined she'd have him waiting for me in my home the next day. I lost my virginity that day because of her, I was too shy to speak up for myself and my mother was never home so the house rules were always my sister's rules. One of the happiest days of my life was when that bitch moved out and I vowed to never speak to her again." I rolled my eyes at the thought then I looked at Ryan, "You said I didn't do anything wrong but I did...I trusted her again."

He shook his head, "Damn, your sister's a bitch."

"Tell me about it, when she shoved us in my room and closed the door I thought that must be what's expected of me. I never spoke up, I was too shy to say two fuckin' letters, one goddamn word. Instead I just let him do what he wanted to me, that's why it's kinda my fault cuz like why couldn't I speak up for myself." I laughed at my stupidity still feeling weak, "I felt so ashamed of myself, it didn't help that both my sisters were calling me easy."

I went into a vicious coughing spell and Ryan rubbed my back until it subsided then he said, "Did you tell the doctor when you was in the hospital?"

I coughed again but briefly this time, "No, they don't give a shit." I cut myself short as I went into another coughing fit.

Ryan stood up, "You want some soup?"

I frowned, "Yuck, I really don't like soup."

"You wanna try and eat this?" He reached over and grabbed the plate off the nightstand.

I nodded as I sat up and took the sandwich from him nibbling at it before sipping my water, "It was later on that

night that I tried to kill myself for the first time I took a bunch of pills. When that guy did that to me last year I slit my wrist but I guess it wasn't deep enough." I held my arms out and showed him my wrist.

He ran his fingers across my thin scar lines before kissing my forehead, "That's why you dated a girl?"

I nodded my head, "Yeah and since my mother's gay I knew she wouldn't have a problem with it. I just wasn't attracted to guys anymore I learned the hard way what an innocent crush can do to you and losing my virginity was really painful. I remember thinking wow this is what people call pleasure? This is what sex is? So I honestly thought I hated it and I never had sex again well you would be my third." I placed my hand on his cheek, "But you are really my first."

"I am your first they don't count," he pecked my forehead again.

"You're my first and only love, my life before you doesn't matter, nothing else matters." My head began spinning a little so I slid back down into the bed.

He felt my forehead, "How are you feeling?"

"Worse, I think I just need some sleep," I turned onto my side and pulled the blanket over me.

"What changed Rama, I know why you stopped dating girls but why'd you decide to start dating guys?" Ryan asked as he lay back down beside me so that we were facing each other.

My voice cracked as I said, "I actually never decided not to date guys I just hadn't met any that I was attracted to. Like I don't have any control over who my heart wants to love and my heart didn't wanna love nobody. Until I saw you, when I saw you I just couldn't turn away it was kinda like a magnet to metal, that's how drawn to you I was. I just wanted to know you, all of a sudden that was all I cared about. I wanted to

watch you dance and I could tell that you were different...I—I wanted you to see me so bad.” Sleep crept into my words and “I only see you” was the last thing I heard Ryan say before it took me over completely.

The next morning I sat up in the bed shielding my eyes from the bright sun, Ryan woke up a little while later asking, “Are you alright sweet pea?”

I giggled, “I actually feel pretty good.”

We sat up and he placed the back of his hand on my forehead smiling, “Your fevers still gone is your stomach bothering you at all?”

I pulled my legs to my chest and hugged them, “No, nothings hurting and my body’s not shaking, I really feel better.” I inhaled deeply, “Damn something smells good as a muthfucka too.”

Ryan got out the bed and stuck his head out the bedroom door yelling down the hall, “Tara you making breakfast?”

I heard her voice in the distance saying yes and I got excited, “Oh my god Ryan I am so hungry right now, you don’t even know—.” I cut myself off as I noticed the way he was smiling at me, “What?” I asked with a grin accompanied by a giggle.

He stretched his arms and yawned, “I was starting to think you weren’t gonna be able to kick that shit.”

I raised my eyebrows, “I know one thing I’m never touchin’ that shit again, fuck that.” I got out the bed and wrapped my arms around his waist, “Does this mean that I’m good or am I still addicted to it?”

He tapped his temple, “It’s all in your mind you just gotta keep strong.” After he pulled his t-shirt over his head then put his arm around me, “And don’t fuck with it no more.”

“Word,” I agreed before we left out the room.

When we walked into Tara's kitchen she was already fixing our plates as we took a seat at the table.

"What up guys, long time no see Rama," she said jokingly as she sat our plates in front of us then she sat down with hers.

I laughed a little, "Yeah I feel so much better today."

"Thanks for breakfast," Ryan said gratefully before stuffing his mouth.

I ate some eggs, "Word Tara this shit is on point."

"Thanks guys," she said with her mouth full.

"Where ya man at?" I asked her before biting into my biscuit.

"Actually Shane's on his way over with Chris they are mad worried about you girl," she told me then gulped down some of her orange juice. "I was too, they are gonna be so relieved when they see that you're feeling better. I told them not to worry cuz your man was taking good care of you."

Tara and I giggled at that while Ryan asked me, "You don't want your bacon Rama?" Then he ate the last bit of food off his plate.

After eating the last of my eggs I pushed my plate toward him, "No, I don't eat pork."

"Oh yeah," Ryan said as he remembered and he must have noticed the confused look on Tara's face because he explained it to her. "She's Muslim," then he ate my bacon.

"Oh yeah that's right," Tara looked at me curiously. "So you've never tasted pork before?"

"Nope," I explained before finishing the rest of my juice.

Once we were done with breakfast I cleaned up while Ryan got in the shower and Tara went out to pick up a few items from the grocery store. When I was finishing up the dishes Tara walked in with Chris and Shane, "Look who I ran into."

"What's up," Chris sat the grocery bag he was holding on the table and hugged me tightly.

"What up Fajita, you feel aiight today?" Shane asked pushing Chris aside and giving me a hug. He squeezed me tight as he spoke in my ear. "You had me shook for a minute Fajita, I ain't know you was fuckin' with that shit. I shoulda looked out for you bettah than that, there's no way I woulda let you fuck with that shit if I knew. You can't play around with that shit." He looked into my eyes sincerely, "I'm sorry."

I broke away from his embrace laughing as I lightly smacked his shoulder, "God Shane you ain't gotta act like I almost died and shit." Beneath my smile my heart was truly touched by his concern. I placed on my chest and closed my eyes briefly, "Lessoned learned."

Our attention turned to Ryan as he came down the hall but none of them said anything to the other. Eventually Shane walked up to Ryan and gave him a pound while Chris was busy pulling two bottles of liquor out of the bag.

He fake slammed the bottles on the table, "Round 'em up we celebrating Fajita gettin' that fuckin' monkey off her back."

We cheered as Shane lined up the shot glasses then Chris poured the liquor and passed them back. He looked at Ryan as he took the glass from him, "Thanks for taking care of my little sis, that's some real shit."

Ryan gave him a nod of understanding before we all drank at the count of three and we kept on drinking. Later on a few of Tara's friends stopped by and drank along with us while we listened to music, played card games, and smoked a few blunts.

## 8.

Tara would not have cared how long we stayed at her place but Long Island was not NYC and that's where we wanted to be. When Friday came back around Tara brought us into the city early in the morning on her way to work. We left our bags in the trunk of her car only taking our backpacks along and Tara brought some fruit from the farmers market before leaving us at Union Square Park.

We sat on a bench with the sun shining down on us and I pulled my novel from my bag, "Looks like a good time to read my book." I crossed my legs and searched for the page I'd left off at.

Ryan read the title aloud, ""Romeo and Juliet", damn you like classics huh?"

I smiled, "Yes I do, and this one's my favorite."

""Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night,"" he smiled and lit a cigarette that he passed to me then lit one for himself.

"You can quote Shakespeare? Wow, I truly love you more than anyone in this world," I took a drag from my cigarette closing my eyes a bit as the smoke danced in front of them.

He smiled brightly, "You're my Juliet." Then he placed his arm around me.

"Okay, I'll be dat, Romeo," I leaned into him speaking with delight. "This book means so much more to me now that it speaks what my hearts feels."

Ryan watched the farmers catering to the consumers while I read and at some point he left me and went to the store. When he returned he was holding two cups of coffee and handed one to me as he said, "Look who I found," when I looked up he pointed behind himself.

I hadn't noticed Denise and Tiffany until that moment, I closed my book and got up to give them hugs as I did my eyes caught sight of their shopping bags, "I see you guys did a little shopping?"

Tiffany held up her bag, "You know it, there's a sale goin' on at Delia's."

I laughed and looked at Ryan, "I didn't know you knew Tiffany and Denise."

Denise jumped in, "Yeah I was like what up Ryan who you out here with? When he told me it was you I was like say word, that's my homegirl take me to her."

Denise pointed back and forth from me to Ryan, "Lemme find out you guys are a couple."

The floating steam capered and glistened around my coffee in the suns early light, I blew at it before taking a sip, "Well, I haven't talked to you lately."

"You go girl, you guys look mad cute together," Denise held her hand up for me to slap it and I did laughing all the while.

"You read?" Tiffany asked me with her eyes on my book.

I looked at the book again, "Yeah, I write poetry and shit too you ain't know?" I questioned her cheerfully before putting my book away.

"No, what type of stuff have you written?" Tiffany inquired further and I saw Ryan look at me curiously.

"Well, I entered a poetry contest once," I added almost forgetting about that until now.

"Word?" Ryan took a sip of his coffee as he sat back down, "What did you write about?"

I let out a shy giggle, "It was about finding my soul mate, my be." I cleared my throat,

"A girl  
Free to simply be  
In love  
With her music  
In love  
With her be  
And she dreams  
That one day, possibly  
Maybe...  
She will find love  
Someone who is just as she  
Is...someone just like her be  
Whoever he may be  
Yes possibly  
Maybe  
No, definitely  
He will be  
A raver  
Because that is her, yes  
That is her be."

"I'm feeling that," Denise said as she sat her bags down in-between her sneakers and lit a cigarette.

"I really liked it. Did you write that for Ryan?" Tiffany joked. "Didn't you hear her Tiff, I'm her be," Ryan agreed playfully.

"Yeah I didn't know it then but he turned out to be my best that I'd been waiting for," I giggled as I moved closer to Ryan. "I ain't win the contest tho'."

He kissed my cheek, "You should have."

Denise connected her fingers together in the shape of a heart and peeked at us through it, "Yo, do you two love birds know where we can cop some glass?"

Ryan used his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he looked up at her, "Nah not in this park, maybe in Washington if some people I know are there."

She looked hopeful, "Wanna walk with us over there? Pretty please, we been tryna get some all morning."

We agreed to walk to Washington Square Park and when we got there it was packed with people all over the place enjoying the beautiful summer day. We found a nice spot to post up and chill while we looked around for familiar faces.

I decided to make the best of our time telling Ryan funny stories about Denise, "You never wanna meet Denise's pops yo. Oh my god if he sees a guy in his crib he's cutting their fuckin' dick off." Ryan opened his eyes wide as I continued, "I witnessed him tell her that shit." Everyone was cracking up as I looked at Denise, "That's the night you told Seth that he could come inside to use your bathroom, member?"

"Oh god, Seth please don't remind me," Denise said throwing a hand up in disgust. Then her eyes caught sight of someone and she quickly said, "Oh shit, be right back." After a few minutes passed she re-appeared with Ryan's friend Pete and announced him, "Big Pete's in da house."

Pete gave everyone a hug before he took a seat in between me and Ryan, "Yo, Denise just told me about you and Miss Rama, congratz bro!" Pete gave Ryan a pound then put his

arm around me, “You know that makes you my sister in law now right?”

I smiled and rolled my eyes at him all at once, “Whoa who ever thought I’d be related to Pete.” We laughed a bit then I looked past Pete at Ryan and joked, “Okay lemme get this straight, you know Pete too and I still never saw you until The Roxy?”

“Speaking of The Roxy ya’ll goin’ tonight?” Tiffany jumped in.

“Bess believe,” I hollered as I tossed my hand in the air jokingly.

I was all ears when Pete stayed within the theme of our conversation telling us a hilarious story about his younger days with Ryan and Brian. I watched as they reminded one another of exactly how the story went and I realized something, Ryan had known Brian and Pete all his life. That left me feeling kind of bad, I knew Brian must really be missing his friend right now because I wouldn’t be able to survive a day without him.

Had I broken up their friendship? I had no idea what happened exactly but it was obvious that when we started speaking they stopped and the way he behaved when Ryan introduced us was real stand offish. I mean Chris, Shane, Denise, Johanna I haven’t known any of them longer than a few years as a matter of fact I didn’t have any friends that I’d grown up with but Brian and Pete were like family to him.

Pete knew where to get some glass so we all copped a bag before Denise and Tiffany headed back to Brooklyn.

We watched everybody else moving about in the park while we continued our conversation. My eyes kept going to Pete’s skateboard, he had a Mark Gonzales deck just like mine and I eventually asked him if I could see it right quick.

Although I needed more speed to do any decent tricks and there wasn't any in this crowded ass park. I kick flipped over a soda can and landed in a switchstance then rode around the park ollieing over the occasional obstacle. When I looked over at Ryan, he was still laughing and talking with Pete but his eyes were watching me. I almost busted my ass when my wheel hit a pebble but luckily I found my balance just in time and decided to call it quits.

We ended up leaving the park with Pete and walking to his apartment in alphabet city. His little studio was messy, there were empty beer cans all over the place and I had to kick a few things out of my path as I made my way to the couch. He wanted us to listen to a new mix tape he'd just brought from Satellite and we did while bumping glass and conversating. The two box fans that he had in the windows were providing little relief from the summer heat and I wound up grabbing a few napkins off the counter to dab at the sweat forming on my forehead. When we finished smoking our last blunt I acted as if Ryan and I had some place to be and I reminded him to go to "Together" tonight as we left out.

Ryan had gotten in touch with his friend Jared while we were at Tara's and he'd promised to front him some drugs. He wanted him to call once we were back into the city so when we reached a payphone Ryan placed the call the same way we always did when we had no change, by dialing 1-800-collect, saying the pay phones number into the recording instead of our name, hanging up and waiting for the person to call back. I watched the cars zoom by as we waited on his call, "Is that the guy with the k'?"

"Yeah," he answered as he lit a cigarette.

I expressed my frustration, “I want crystal way more then I want k’, its k’ all around me, that’s all anybody ever has anymore.”

“That shit is sellin’ right now, kids love that shit—,” he cut himself off as the phone started ringing. Ryan talked with Jared for about ten minutes then he hung up and looked at me, “He said he’d meet up with us at the park.” I nodded in understanding as he grabbed my hand and we walked back to the park.

Jared showed up about an hour later, we hopped in his car and rode around the city while we smoked a few blunts. He dropped us back off at Washington Square Park but not before he gave Ryan the k’ and a knot of money.

We didn’t go inside though instead we walked to the smoke shop around the corner and brought the little baggies we needed to package the k’. There were some guys in the shop talking with one another, one of them was a short animated character who kept repeating to his friends, “C’mom man, that would never be me son, you know my stilo.”

When we left back out of the store Ryan imitated the loud man at the exact time as me, we laughed and he said, “We should make that our new word.”

I agreed, “Yeah, you know my stilo kid.” We laughed a while longer at that and because it felt good to have money in our pockets and drugs to sell.

When we got closer to the park I noticed Tara’s car was parked on the street and squeezed Ryan’s hand, “Yo look to ya left by the traffic light, ain’t that Tara’s car?”

Ryan’s eyes went in that direction, “Damn she outta work already?” We simultaneously turn to the left and walked toward her.

Hurrying across the street I tapped the car's hood, Tara had all her windows down with one leg up on the dashboard smoking a cigarette. She jumped a little at the noise I'd just made while I said, "Whatchu doing here girl?"

Her huge shiny black sunglasses mirrored our reflection when she looked up at us through her open window. Smoke exited her mouth and nose as she spoke, "Shane's coppin' something right quick, what are you guys up to?"

"Chillin'," I explained leaning on her car.

"You're done with work already?" Ryan asked her.

She moved her leg off the dashboard and sat up straight, "I left early, it's too hot for my boss's bullshit today, I'm tryna get high already."

"Oh we rollin' witchu," I told her as Ryan opened the back door. I slid the straps of my bag off my shoulders and hopped into the back seat right behind him. "Ya'll going to the The Roxy tonight?" I pulled out my pack of cigarettes and held one out to Ryan, "Want one baby?"

"Yeah we're hittin' that shit up." Tara sat up and whipped her head toward us, "You guys might as well roll with us."

"Yeah we might as well," Ryan agreed as he lit my cigarette and then his. Blowing out a stream of smoke he pointed ahead and said, "There he goes right there." We sat back and watched Shane walk to the car and get in the front seat. Tara rolled her window back up a little and started her engine, the radio popped on while Shane turned to greet us.

"Fajita and Ryan what's up guys," he held his hand out so and we gave him a pound.

"What's up Shane, where's big Chris at?" I jerked back a little as the car moved forward.

"He's in Jersey at his sister's crib, she was havin' like a baby shower or sumthin' today." Shane grinned as he showed Tara the baggies of Meth and Weed that he'd just copped.

"Who'd you get that off of?" Ryan asked as Shane passed the baggies to us.

We examined them while he spoke, "Umm, I think his names Darren or sumthin that scruffy lookin' white kid with the dreads."

"Yeah that's him, we just had some of his shit earlier," Ryan let him know as he passed the baggies back to him.

"Yeah that shit is official." I agreed before asking, "Can we dry this k' out at your crib Shane?"

"We'll hit you off with however much you want, if that's cool," Ryan's voice was drowned out by Tara's car stereo but Shane still managed to hear him loud and clear.

"Yeah, no doubt," Shane yelled behind him.

"Good lookin'out," I said gratefully then I slid my hand into Ryan's as I enjoyed the summer breeze that blew in from the open windows.

By the time we were finished packaging the special k' Daylight had come and gone. I braided Tara's hair for her again and when we were ready to leave hid all the twenty bags in the cups of my bra the same way I use to when I was selling coke. We got to The Roxy a little early but apparently so did everyone else and after a few minutes of standing around someone yelled out, ""Now here's a little story I got to tell""; the first line of Paul Revere by the Beastie Boys.

I looked at Ryan and smiled as Shane hollered another line back, ""About three bad brothers ya know so well"".

Ryan yelled out along with me and a few other ravers, ""It started way back in history"".

My eyes were filled with delight when just about the entire line joined in, ““With Ad Rock, MCA and me Mike D.”” A few people started beatboxing and we all continued in harmony, it came as no surprise that everyone knew that song...it’s awesome just like us.

We stayed together most of the night dancing and meeting new people since there was no need to advertise what we were selling. We were with Shane and he made a living selling k’, everybody knew he had it but Chris wasn’t here tonight so he let us have all his business, when people would come asking he just sent them to us.

I ran into Jie and Eddie and introduced them to Ryan that’s when they warned me that Leah was here tonight. I nudged Ryan and pointed in her direction as soon as I caught sight of Leah standing in the far corner of the club running her mouth to a group of kids.

Ryan looked over at her, “That’s your ex?”

I nodded uncomfortably while he studied her for a moment and before I knew it he was walking over there. I stayed behind watching him closely unsure of what to expect as he introduced himself but I relaxed when I saw her smile and give him a hug. They exchanged a few more words before both of them started walking over to me. I wasn’t sure what to say to her so I casually looked away and pretended not to see them. She tapped my shoulder and after much hesitation I turned and looked at her with a surprised smile as if I hadn’t known she was there.

She leaned close to my ear before speaking, “Yo, Rama I just met your man, he’s cool I mean he said that ya’ll serious and shit. Like I really didn’t wanna hear that but he seems like he really loves you and that’s all I ever wanted for you yo. I still care about you regardless of what you might think but

umm, yeah I'm happy for you. But if he hurts you yo, just say the word cuz you're still mines," she laughed and held her arms out for a hug.

I laughed too, I thought it was sweet that she was acting as if she cared and after I gave her a quick kiss on her cheek we embraced, "Thanks for being cool about it." I was relieved that things went so smoothly and as she walked away I noticed that she had another girl with her. That could be the reason she got over it so fast but regardless I was thankful that she was finally over me and wasn't trying to get in the way of my happiness.

By the time the party was over we'd made plans to stay in Staten Island with Ryan's friend Frank and we parted ways with Tara and Shane once again. Frank gave us his roommate's bedroom since he was out of town and the daylight had already taken it over by the time we'd climbed into bed.

I folded one arm underneath my head and my voice was groggy when I spoke, "Ryan what did you say to Leah?"

He gave me an exhausted chuckle, "Nothing really I was like what's up I'm Rama's man. Yo I don't know if you still got feelings for her or not but if you do I can't blame you cuz she's amazing and I would never let anything happen to her that's basically the gist of it." He kissed my chin, "Get some sleep sweet pea, I love you."

I smiled and pulled the blanket up a little more, "I love you too, sleep tight."

The weekend came back around faster than usual, we went to "Together" and had a great time but when we got back I wasn't able to fall asleep. I took one of Frank's sleeping pills because I wanted to be well rested for the rave later that night. When it was time to go I still felt tired so I told Ryan

and Frank to go ahead without me before pulling the blankets over my head and falling back to sleep.

The front door slamming shut woke me up just as Ryan entered the room and I pushed myself up on my elbows. The summer sun was just beginning to rise making the room brighter with every second, "Hey baby, how was the party?"

He looked exhausted as he sighed and sat a stack of flyers on the bookshelf, "Packed." I watched him undress down to his boxers then he lay beside me and sliding closer to him I pressed my face against his warm chest while he told me all about his night. He spoke about the new connections and money opportunities he'd made and as I listened I also had a thought on the side. About the way his mind was always working trying to figure out a way for us...when he went to raves, yes he had fun, he danced and enjoyed the music but he also hustled. We were able to keep money in our pockets because Jared had fronted him a lil' sumthin plus he collected money owed from this one and that. I refocused when he got quiet and after a few minutes of silence he asked, "Sweet pea what do you think about having a threesome?"

I lifted my head up a little higher to look into his eyes, "Have you ever had one before?"

"No but I always wanted to," he slid his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

"I always wanted to try it too," I lay my head back on his chest. "Maybe we will, it would have to be with a girl that we both think is cute tho'," I added before closing my eyes again.

"Aight," he agreed as he stroked my hair.

Frank only wanted to go out locally during the week and we had to convince him to go out to NYC that Wednesday night. Ryan had a flyer for a rave called "Pleasure on Earth" it was free to get in with a buttahs DJ line up so we were happy

to go. There weren't many people there but that always made for great socializing and plenty dance space. While Ryan walked around the club with Frank I took full advantage of the semi-empty dance floor and the jungle music that the DJ was spinning. After a few songs a guy two-stepped toward me and told me how much he loved this song at first he seemed so much taller than me but I laughed at myself when I realized that it was due to the seven inches of platform attached to the bottom of his sneakers. His moves were so precise and effortless, I guess that's why I hadn't noticed until about the fifth song that we'd danced to.

Frank wanted to leave early but we didn't so we sent him on his way we had our important stuff in the backpacks that we always kept with us. Ryan told him to put the other bags in the trunk of his car and that way he'd have them whenever we got back up with him. We watched him walkout the exit and then I watched a girl that caught my eye as she was passing me by, I pointed her out to Ryan, "What do you think about her?"

He stared at her for a moment, "Yeah she's cute."

I took a deep breath, "I'm 'bouta go talk to her." I walked away from him and approached the short girl she had thick legs, chubby cheeks and jet black curls spiraling out of her head. I flirtatiously touched her waist and leaned close to her ear, "Hi, I just wanted to tell you that you are a very pretty girl."

Judging by her smile she seemed to be flattered by the compliment, "Thank you, you're mad pretty too." She held her hand out, "I'm Mandy."

I ignored her hand and pulled her in for a hug, "Nice to meet you, my names Rama." I pointed in Ryan's direction, "That's my man over there he wanted to meet you too."

Her smile widened, "Okay."

I took her hand and led her through the scattered crowd when we reached Ryan he smiled at her while I introduced them, "Ryan this is Mandy."

He gave her a hug, "You come here a lot?"

"No, this is my first time here, I didn't have anything better to do and it was free so I figured why not." She turned to look at me then back at him, "I was just telling your girlfriend how cute she is."

He let out a chuckle as he slid his arm around me, "I know right." He put his other arm around her, "We should all hang out after this."

I looked at Ryan and ceased the opportunity to seal the deal, "There is no way I could hang out with a girl like Mandy without getting' sumthin started, I mean look at her she's too fuckin' sexy."

Ryan and Mandy laughed before Mandy raised her eyebrow and said, "I'm down with that."

I looked Mandy, "But that would be wrong to leave my man out."

Mandy gave his cheeks a light squeeze, "Oh I got no problem with him joining us."

He was smiling ear to ear now, "I ain't got no problem with that either, you know my stilo."

"Let's dance," I suggested when my song popped on, they agreed and we went to the dance floor. The party ended at about eight in the morning and we were delighted when Mandy told us that she had her own car and her own place. We made plans to go there but we wanted to stop at the park first to see who was out where last night.

We ran into a few friends when we got there they'd come from a rave where someone had died of a drug overdose and

they seemed a little traumatized by it. I spent about an hour consoling a girl I didn't even know but she knew the guy who'd passed away and although I didn't know who he was either I couldn't just leave her like that. If a fellow raver can't help you out no one could, I listened to her share her memories with me and eventually she calmed down, she thanked me and I hugged her tightly before she left.

I told Ryan I'd be back and walked to the store with Mandy to get a soda and a pack of cigarettes when we returned we entered on the opposite side. I saw some friends of mine from upstate and they called me over asking if I'd gone to the rave they'd just come from in Brooklyn. We exchanged stories about our night then one of them asked about Lauren which made me laugh as I explained everything.

One of the girls briefly looked around before asking, "So is this new boyfriend that Lauren went ballistic over here with you?"

"Umm, yeah we're always together." I looked around the park it was hard to find him amongst all the ravers that were sprinkled all over the park. Some of them looked totally fucked up in the bright morning sunlight and some were still dancing to the imaginary music stuck in their heads. I eventually spotted Ryan with a group of kids, he wasn't looking my way but I knew that he knew exactly where I was as I pointed him out to them, "There he is right there."

Collin looked at me with raised eyebrows as he stood up and pointed, "Yo, that dude right there is your man? He's playin' you Rama we saw him at "Nation" on Saturday and he had his arms around two chicks and neither of them were you."

I had to think about that for a minute, he did go to "Nation" without me so it was possible but their accusations did not

upset me in the slightest. I took a seat next to them and just watched him for a moment he looked so cute spreading that beautiful smile of his around. I knew what he was doing networking, he was more business minded then anyone I knew that's why I never had to worry about anything. I needed that security in my life sure he was flirtatious but I never told him that he couldn't be at times I've even initiated some of it. I turned to Collin who was still waiting for a response, "I'm sure it was for a reason, they were probably his homies." Then I cracked my soda open and took a few sips before offering some to Mandy who'd been standing there quietly.

She took a sip before saying, "I'll be back Rama I see my peeps over there." I nodded and watched her walk off. Collin started laughing pretty loud so I snapped my head back in his direction, "What?"

"Oh my god, I can't believe what I'm hearing like is this Rama talking?" Then he mimicked me in a stupid sounding voice, "I know there is a reason that my man was all hugged up on two girlies."

"What?" I asked again to a bunch of amazed eyes. "Trust me it's not even like that." I held my finger out in counting position, "First off I'm not a insecure kinda girl and secondly he's just a naturally flirtatious kinda guy which I see nothing wrong with." I assured them, I knew that it was just jealousy because our love was so strong that people could see that shit and they wanted what we had. I got up and dusted myself off as I said, "Well I'll get up with ya'll later, peace out."

I walked back over to Ryan and stood by his side he was still talking while he slid his hand into mine and I squeezed it tight. He gave me two squeezes in return and I knew that meant he'd gotten some money or drugs or something had worked out in our favor. I was anxious to find out what but

never the less I joined in as everyone started laughing at the end of his story, I'd heard it plenty of times and it was still hilarious. I lit a cigarette and handed it to him before lighting one for myself.

He took the burning stogey as he scanned the park quickly, "Where'd Mandy go?"

Pointing in the direction she'd walk off in I said, "Over there somewhere, looking like she's ready to go."

We headed in that direction after we said goodbye to the people around us and when we were far enough to speak privately he explained the double hand squeeze, "Yo, Amy needs to get her hands on a few grams of blow for a house party she's having next weekend." Ryan waved his hand trying to get Mandy's attention once he spotted her. She finally noticed and as she approached he asked her, "You ready to go?"

"Hell yeah, you guys ready?" She jiggled her keys.

"Let's be out," I said as she led the way and we followed not too far behind.

"Sweet pea, what I'm thinking is that we could get her the blow and make that money so we can move into Pete's place. He was at "Nation" Saturday and told me that he's looking for someone to take over his lease." Ryan opened Mandy's passenger side door and I hopped in, he got in the back and Mandy sped off.

I rolled the window down enjoying the hot air blowing in my face, Mandy had her radio blasting so I looked back at Ryan and mouthed the words, "Okay I'll do it." He smiled in approval and I got back to looking out the window wondering where I was going to get the nerve to go to Spanish Harlem and see my mom's dealer. I knew she'd told him that I'd runaway by now but I was hoping he wouldn't care and serve

me anyway, it was a chance I'd have to take because getting this apartment with Ryan would be a dream come true.

When we got to Mandy's apartment in Queens it was very small and very pink, we sat down on the couch while she fixed us a drink. I wasn't sure how to go about getting our experimental threesome started but I needed to try something before it got too awkward. I took a few sips of my soda before placing my cup on one of the coasters that were spread about her coffee table then I pointed to the closed door on my left, "That's your bedroom in there?"

Mandy laughed, "Yeah, wanna see?" She walked out of her kitchen and straight into the bedroom.

I stood up and followed behind her the sheer fuchsia curtains blew lightly with the soft breeze that was sneaking in through the open windows as we walked in. Hot pink marabou feathers trimmed her leopard comforter and pillows I sunk into its plushy-ness then called out, "Ryan come in here and check out her fly ass room."

Mandy was standing by her dresser and explained herself shyly, "As you can tell I love pink."

"This is hot," Ryan complemented as he walked in and looked around.

I patted the spot beside me on the bed and Ryan came and sat down then I pated the spot on the other side of me and looked at Mandy, "C'mere Mandy, sit down and relax."

When she sat down I figured I better get right to it before she chickened out so I pushed her hair away from her face admiring her necklace as I leaned closer to her, "Wow this shit is nice, is it real?" Before she could answer me I kissed her soft lips and she kissed me back. At some point I felt Ryan kiss the back of my neck so I turned my attention to him

again. We went back and forth like that for a while and that led to other pleasures.

We'd all fallen asleep after that and awoke later that evening, by the time we were all showered and dressed it was nighttime again. Ryan counted out the amount of money I told him I would need to get the grams then we hugged Mandy goodbye, she wanted us to come back there later so I promised her that we'd call her soon.

## 9.

While we stood in the subway waiting on the train to Spanish Harlem I told Ryan stories about when I used to accompany my mother whenever she'd drive into the city to re-up. I looked over at him as I slid my hand in between the straps of my backpack and started to slide them up and down nervously, "So I think Tony should recognize me I just hope he doesn't call my mom or nuthin."

We got off the train about a block away, the closer we got the more uncomfortable I felt and all the people staring at us didn't help. I could understand why I mean we both had chains hanging from the front of our huge cut off jeans and it attached to the wallets in our back pockets, it made us stick out like a sore thumb. A feeling of relief came over me when I spotted Tony's cousin Hector hanging out by the cluster of pay phones.

I spoke in a low nervous tone, "Okay Ryan I see his cousin right over there." We kept our heads straight as I finished what I was saying, "Umm since they be actin' all weird around new faces maybe you should go into the restaurant right here and order us some arroz con pollo okay, I'll meet you in there."

"You sure?" He asked trying to read my eyes.

We stopped in front of the Spanish restaurant and I wiped the beads of sweat from my forehead with my hand. "Yeah

if he doesn't wanna fuck with me I'll be right back if I don't return right away that's a good thing."

"Aiight, what did you say you wanted again?" He asked through a wide grin.

I said it again slowly, "Arroz con pollo, rice with chicken it's so good, I use to order it when I'd come here with my moms."

He nodded and kissed me on the cheek before going inside I took a deep breath and continued toward the payphone. Hector squinted his eyes while he looked me up and down as I approached then before I could say anything he said, "You Jamila's daughter?"

I wrote that off as a good sign, if he recognized me he'd be more likely to deal with me. I nodded, "Yeah it's me." I figured it be best to get straight to the point so I said, "What's up Hector, I need some Fishkill?"

He nodded, "The same as ya moms be gettin'?"

I contained my excitement as I nodded, "Ah huh." He was all business just like I was hoping he'd be and I did what I'd seen my mother do hundreds of times. I sat the money inside the pay phones change dispenser in front of him then I moved away. Hector took the phone off the hook and pretended to make a call before hanging it up, taking the money and walking around the corner. After a few minutes he came back with a disposable coffee cup it had a lid on it so no one could see what was inside.

He sat it on top of the payphone and raised his thick eyebrows while he looked at me. "Your mom told us you ran away from home girl," he was chewing gum and trying to look concerned.

My heart jumped into my throat but I kept calm, "Please don't tell her you saw me."

He frowned, “The streets of New York is a dangerous place mami so be careful and don’t fuck with nobody for this shit but me cuz you can’t trust these muthafuckas out here.”

“Kay I won’t, Good lookin’ out Hector I really appreciate it,” I hadn’t expected him to be so nice.

“No doubt mami, I put my number in there for you too if you need anything just give me a call. Next time just pay me after you make it,” he added taping the top of the payphone once before walking away.

I pretended to make a call on the same payphone then I took the cup he’d left for me. The bells rang softly as I pushed the restaurant door open and greeted the cashier while my eyes searched for Ryan in a calm manner. The place was packed but I finally spotted him sitting at a table toward the back and took a deep breath of success as I walked over. When he noticed me approaching he smiled from ear to ear I smiled back and slid into the seat opposite him. “It’s all good baby,” I whispered then I tapped the cup on the table softly.

His eyes went to it with raised eyebrows and he whispered back, “In there?”

I nodded before putting it away, “He gave me his number too so we definitely gotta connect now.” I grabbed his fork and took a bite of the food that sat in front of him, “This shit is bangin’ right?”

He laughed a little nodding, “I never had that before that shit’s off the hook.”

“You never had this before? Say word yo,” I took another bite eating it happily.

Sliding the fork out from between my lips I chewingly said, “Do you know that I never thought about the future or at least I never saw happiness in my future until I met you. It’s like you came into my life and changed my world.” I got some

more rice and beans onto my fork, "Just by loving me, no one's ever loved me the way you do and that makes me feel like I'm somebody, ya know...for the first time in my life like I feel all special and shit."

Ryan smiled and really looked into my eyes, I swear it was like our souls connected whenever he did that, "I love you so much Rama...I never met anyone like you yo it's crazy how amazing you are."

My gaze was still stuck to his as I smiled and chewed some more, "I love you too baby and I never met nobody like you either, you're the bomb diggy." Then I took a few more bites before looking around and saying, "I'm ready to blow this joint tho', you?"

He agreed and on that note we left, the night's air was cool and crisp while we strolled back down Broadway, "You got Amy's number right?" I asked when the thought hit me.

"No but I told her we'd see her at The Roxy tomorrow. Hey, where are we going tonight?" He asked in return.

"I dunno I mean we are on a budget," then another thought hit me as we waited for the street lights to change. "I never picked up my last check, you think they still got it or do you think they just went ahead and mailed it to Lauren?"

"Damn, I forgot all about that shit, we'll just go over there sometime tomorrow and see if they're still holding it or what," he took my hand and the headlights of the stopped traffic shined on us as we crossed the street.

We ended up going to "Twilo" since it was only five dollars to get in but there weren't many people there. Ryan told me that Brian owed him some money so we were hoping to run into him, we brought two ecstasy pills and after we drank them down and did a few lines of crystal we danced. When my favorite song came on Ryan and I challenged each other

and at some point kids started to gather around us. I was lost in the music with him oblivious to everything around me and that's what made our love so magical, we didn't just simply dance to the music we stepped inside of it...together.

The way Ryan moved made him appear to be on roller skates at times and when he'd put his hands in his pockets it looked sexy especially underneath the strobe lights. I liked to pretend that I was holding a long imaginary ribbon and twirl it around in the air, wrapping and unwrapping myself with it, sometimes I'd hand the ribbon to him and he'd give it an imaginary tug that I'd gracefully spin into. The true romance of raving wasn't the drugs, or the city, or the ravers it was the music and being able to dance to it in this way, with no restraints.

I was sitting at a table with Ryan watching all the nightclub happenings when I spotted Amy. I smiled as I got up and rushed over to her giving her a big hug before I led her back to where we sat.

Ryan stood up and gave her a hug as well then she asked, "Have you guys seen Keith? I just came from The Limelight, I'm on my way home but I wanted to see if he was up in here."

Ryan shook his head no then I took her attention saying, "Yo, we can do that transaction tonight if you want. We were going to Queens after this but we could just crash at your place instead, if that's cool with you."

Her eyes lit up and she looked at her watch, "Okay cool, are you guys ready to leave now cuz I'm crazy tired."

We agreed and left the club, while we were stopped at a red light Amy looked into her rear view mirror at Ryan. "Brian and his girl was There, he asked me if I'd seen you." She glued her eyes back onto the road as the light changed and she started to drive again.

Ryan sat up straight, "Yo, I was tryna get up with that kid can you swing me over there maybe I can catch him?" She agreed driving in that direction and when we reached the nightclub she pulled over. Only a few people were hanging outside but judging by the amount of light in the sky it would soon be closing time.

Ryan jumped out the backseat and walked over to my open passenger's side window, "I'mma hang out here and get up with Brian."

"You got Amy's number?" I didn't want to separate but I knew we needed this money.

"Nah," he answered.

I was searching for a pen in the pocket of her car door when he said, "Just meet me at our spot at like umm noon, aiight?"

I nodded in agreement as he leaned in my window and kissed me, "I love you."

"I love you too," I replied then he said bye to Amy and walked away. I watched him walk over to some friends of ours that I hadn't noticed until now and that eased my mind a little. I yelled out the window to them, "What up Jack, I see you over there too Tommy."

They yelled hello back and Ryan waved goodbye to me one last time as I blew him a kiss that he pretended to catch. When we pulled off I stared at him out my window until I could see him no longer, being separated from him felt really strange to me...wrong. My mind went into a brief panic, what if Brian wasn't there anymore? What if he left right after Amy? Where would Ryan sleep since there was no way to call me? I shook my head at myself why was I like this all of a sudden when I knew perfectly well that he could take care of himself.

I felt my mind beginning to unravel so I turned the volume up on Amy's car stereo and focused on the music.

Amy told me that her parents were asleep so when we got to her place we crept through her dark apartment carefully. It was really spacious and most of the furniture was glass besides the sofa. When we reached her bedroom she turned the light on and tossed me a nightgown along with a wad of cash. I held it up and whispered, "This is three hundred?"

She nodded yes, after I finished changing I sat my folded clothes on top of my bag and placed the money inside one of the smaller pockets. Pulling a sandwich size baggy out I tapped at the white powder until it all fell to the bottom then I gave it to her and whispered, "That's five grams uncut."

Amy gave me a pleased wink and tucked the drugs away in her top draw while I got into bed then she turned the lights back out and slid in on the other side. We whispered goodnight to each other even though it was already dawn and then I stared at the etched floral ceiling until I fell asleep.

When I woke up it felt like I'd been asleep all day and my heart instantly began to race, I looked to my left and saw that Amy had gotten out of the bed already. The place seemed quiet as I jumped up and got dressed stumbling into the legs of my pants. Amy walked back in smiling, "What's up sleepy head, you want some breakfast?"

I shook my head, "Nah, what time is it?"

"Eleven thirty," she informed me.

I relaxed a little after learning that I hadn't overslept then I pointed in the direction of her parent's room and mouthed the words silently, "Are your parents still here?"

She laughed, "No they leave out early every morning, come out on the veranda and have a smoke with me?"

Tightening the belt on my huge jeans I nodded yes and laid her nightgown across the bed then I stood on my tippy toes and stretched my arms to the sky. I followed her out onto her huge balcony sliding the glass door back closed behind myself then I pulled my cigarette pack out of my pocket. Amy was already sitting down smoking as she let out a cluster of giggles, "What?"

"Nothing, it's just so funny to me the way ravers be all hunched over when they're digging in their pockets because our jeans are so fucking big," she took a drag of her cigarette.

I laughed at that, "I know right, my pockets are like down by my knees and shit." I skipped over to the edge of her enormous balcony and admired the view, "Wow the city looks nice from way up here."

She blew gray fog out of her mouth, "You know I had to try that shit out right?" Amy held her hand up for a high five and I walked over to her and slapped it as she said, "That's some good shit."

I sat down in the cushioned patio chair next to her bringing one knee up to my chest, "I'm glad you like it, if you need any more I gotchu."

"Cool, hey you want to do a line with me?" She asked pushing her blonde hair behind her ears.

"Oh no thanks, I don't really do coke but if you had some crystal that would be an entirely different story," I laughed.

It was noon by the time I left Amy's and walked to the park praying silently that he'd be there waiting for me. A bunch of butterflies flew through my body when I spotted him sitting on our bench, I never smiled so big and the sun never shined so bright. He noticed me instantly and called out to me with a smile, "Sweet pea."

Ryan stood up as I walked over to him hugging him tightly and pressing my lips passionately into his. "I wasn't sure if you'd be here," I told him excitedly.

"I woulda waited for you all day," Ryan gave me another kiss on my forehead. "I been here for a minute now," he expressed cheerfully while he sat back down.

I took my seat beside him while he pulled a brown paper bag from his backpack and handed it to me. When I opened it I gave him a pleased smile and took the onion bagel with cream cheese and tomato slices into my hand. I took a bite before pecking his cheek, "Awe thank you so much baby I'm starving. Oh yeah and Amy, she brought that but you neglected to tell me that she was a rich bitch damn. We was straight chillin' in her penthouse on the 113<sup>th</sup> floor. All her furniture was like made outta glass and you know I'm type clumsy so I had to be extra careful not to knock nuthin' over," we laughed for a minute.

"Yeah her mom's works for like the news or sumthin, did she say if she was gonna need more?" He asked.

"Well she said that it's some good shit and she said that she needs a connect so I think she'll be doin' business with us again," I informed him.

"That's cool, no doubt," he said pleasingly.

I chewed some more bagel before I spoke again, "Did you end up finding Brian?"

"Yeah, we chilled until it was time for me to meet up with you he's on his way back upstate as we speak," he pulled a bottle of apple juice out his backpack and gulped some down.

I held my hand out for it as I spoke, "I know he musta been happy."

He cleared his throat, "What makes you say that?"

I took a swig of the bitter juice before I continued, “I mean you guys did grow up together.” Shrugging my shoulders as I continued, “I dunno, like the way you went from always chillin’ with him to hardly fuckin’ with him? That’s kinda cold to do ya friend like that.”

He looked into my eyes, “Nah, it’s more complicated than that.”

I frowned my face as I wrestled some more bagel down, “Complicated how?”

He leaned back breathing deeply as he explained, “He kept tryna hook me up with his girlfriend’s sister and we talked for about a week or two but I never really liked her. So he basically got mad cuz I dissed his future sister in-law when I got with you.” We shared an awkward silence before he continued, “I told him if he can’t just be cool with you on the strength that you’re my girl then I ain’t gonna bring you around. That would make you feel uncomfortable...he can act real childish sometimes,” he tilted his head to the side as he lit his cigarette.

I studied his face before I spoke, “I guess I feel kinda mad at him for that like he didn’t even give me a chance, cuz it was obvious that he was feeling some type of way, ya know. At the same time I feel fucked up too cuz that was ya boy and if I ain’t come into the picture he’d still be ya boy.”

Ryan sucked his teeth, “Fuck him.”

He looked more troubled by that than he allowed me to see and I found myself recalling the story Tara had told me, he’d had her and her cousins back that night and I know he had mine too, but did I have his? I never really considered how he might have felt about Shane and Chris I mean just because they weren’t mad at him anymore didn’t necessarily mean that he wasn’t still upset with them. I let out a deep breath

and said, “I’mma stop fuckin’ with Chris and Shane too, the way they acted toward you was wack. Shane ain’t really the problem, it’s Chris, wouldn’t he want me to be happy? I’m mad happy with you and anyone that’s not supportive of that —of us, don’t need to be around us regardless of what.”

He stretched his arm around me and pulled me close, “It’s all about us fuck everybody else.”

With raised eyebrows I finished the last of my bagel absorbing this moment with him on this day. It was immaculate the park looked like a landscape straight out of a painting, the way the people were spread throughout it walking their dogs, jogging and gathering in groups while birds flew about in the warm sunshine. I listened to the sound of my own heartbeat for a moment as the gentle summer breeze caressed my skin. My ears picked up other sounds as well, like the cars honking, the people talking and various melodies...the noise of life.

I sighed as I balled up my empty paper bag then I said entertainingly, “You think I can’t make this shot?”

He measured the distance of the trash can by squinting and closing one eye before he grinned and shook his head no.

I laughed, “Oh, so you think I can’t make it huh?” I tossed it in the direction of the basket but it bounced off the edge and fell onto the ground. I sucked my teeth as I got up and threw the misguided ball of paper into the trash. “I’m no Jordan,” I added to poke fun at myself.

Ryan laughed, “I think the wind caused some interference.”

I playfully pushed his shoulder, “Yeah, I doubt that.”

He turned his body toward me showing me a knot of cash in the pocket of his bag pack, “Oh yeah, I got the money Brian owed me too.” He zipped the money back in his bag then unzipped another compartment to show me the small, brown glass viles that were packed in there. “Whatever we

sell off this is ours we just need some place to dry this shit out," he explained.

At the fountain area of the park a man had just finished setting up and began playing his saxophone the music sounded so perfect I could have cried. I slid my hand into his, "Don't leave me ever again baby, I couldn't even feel comfortable at Amy's I felt like...I dunno...incomplete."

"Don't worry sweet pea we bouta get our own crib," he sighed while he leaned back and looked at the sky. "You wanna see if your job still got your check?"

I smacked my forehead lightly, "Yeah, I forgot all about that shit and I think I gotta place where we can dry out this k' too."

He didn't try to hide his interest as he sat up straight, "Where?"

"My friend Matt's crib in the St. Marks Village, I never introduced you to him cuz he kinda asked me out once," I confessed. "I turned him down so I don't think he'll be too excited to meet the guy I chose over him," I warned.

He laughed, "Damn that's too bad for him." Then he stood up and put his back pack on, "let's go."

"Seriously, you wanna go there after we stop at the market?" I asked with shock in my voice, he nodded yes as I grabbed my back pack and followed his lead.

When we walked into my old job it seemed desolate compared to the amount of people walking about outside there were only three cashiers and I was relieved that none of them were Lauren. The manager caught sight of me and held his finger up motioning for me to wait just before vanishing into the back. He returned with an envelope and as he handed it to me he smiled and said, "You know Rama if you've cleaned up your act I'll gladly hire you back, we could use the help."

I gave him a big smile and took the white envelope out of his hand, “Wow thanks I really appreciate it, I might just take you up on that.” I grabbed Ryan’s hand and pulled him with me as I walked out the door once we were on the sidewalk I said, “Oh my god, I can’t believe he offered me my job back, that’s mad cool.”

“Yeah, after we get settled into our apartment you should go back there,” Ryan added sounding excited for me.

“Yeah but I’m sure he’s gonna piss test me first,” I added as I ripped the envelope open. “It’s more than I expected,” I told him as I stared at my check with pleased eyes.

“You know Pete’s gonna be at “Together” tonight so we’ll work out the details when we see him.” He assured me as I stuffed my check in my bag and we headed toward St. Marks Village.

I was just about to give up and assume that Matt wasn’t home when he finally came to the door. He seemed uncomfortable at first but he still invited us in and offered us a beer. We didn’t want to just outright ask if we could dry special-k in his kitchen, we needed to feel him out first so I suggested that we watch a movie.

Once we’d finished a few more beers he’d seemed to relax, he was conversing with Ryan about music so I seized the opportunity and asked him, “Hey Matt would you mind terribly if I steamed some k’ in your kitchen? It doesn’t take that long at all.”

He acted like he needed to think really hard before he answered, “I guess so.”

I moved closer to him on the couch and gave him a hug, “Thank you I really appreciate it.” Looking back at Ryan I said, “You want me to do it baby?”

He walked passed me to the kitchen and sat his bag on the table, “You know how to steam it?” He asked as he took the viles out and sat them on the kitchen counter.

“No, not really,” I walked over to him and examined one of the viles. “Yeah it’s probably best if you do it.”

Ryan looked at Matt, “Where do you keep your pots and shit?”

Matt pointed to the cabinet over the stove, “In there.”

“Do you guys do k’ or you just sell it?” Matt asked opening another beer and sitting it in front of me.

“Both,” Ryan answered as he caught the beer Matt tossed to him.

Within that hour Ryan had convinced Matt to do some with us, in between sniffling I asked him, “Are you goin’ to the Roxy tonight?”

“DJ Sameer is spinning right?” Matt asked wiping his nose with his hand.

“Yes! I can’t wait,” I told him with excitement while Ryan listened from the kitchen where he was still preparing the k’.

“He’s your favorite DJ right? I’mma be there,” Matt acted as if he’d pulled that one out of the depths of his memory

“Whoa did I hear you right you’re actually going tonight?” I asked him while I wondered around boringly exploring his apartment.

Matt followed me with his eyes, “Yeah I’m off tomorrow so I figure why not, ya know.”

“Oh, you going to that shit Matt?” Ryan budded in from the kitchen.

Matt nodded, “Yeah, yo did you guys get on the list?”

I was in his roommate’s room now snooping around while I yelled, “Nah I don’t do all that guest list shit, fuck that.” I looked at myself in the huge mirror that sat atop his oak

dresser playing with my hair and slicking my eyebrows down. My eyes caught sight of the wig that was on the head of a porcelain mannequin sitting in the middle of his roommates turn tables. I yelled behind me to Matt, “Yo, I see Jeremy still gots that big ass muthafuckin’ afro wig?” I chugged some more beer down as I stared at it giggling.

Eventually I grabbed the huge wig off of the statues head and put it on then I walked into the kitchen. Ryan glanced over at me and burst into laughter, “You should wear that wig outside.”

“I dare you to,” Matt added.

I laughed as I lightly patted the wig with my hands, “I know, that would be funny as hell.

“I’m dead serious, come with me to the corner store, I wanna go get a soda,” Matt suggested comically.

The thought of it was funny enough idea and it didn’t look crazy even though it was a really big afro it could pass as my real hair. We walked down the streets of St. Mark’s village and every person we passed stared at me when we got to the store people were pressing their faces against the glass window to get a look at me. We tried not to laugh acting serious made it funnier and judging by the amount of heads I was turning people may have even thought that I was Foxy Brown.

When we got back Ryan sat a dinner plate full of special-k on the coffee table, the once clear liquid was now a white fluffy powder. We scooped it up with playing cards and started pouring it into little blue baggies.

Hours had passed before any of us thought to look at the time and when we finally did it was time to go. Matt accompanied us on our walk to the park since he’d planned to meet his friends there. When we arrived I hugged him

goodbye and he promised to see me shortly at “Together” then he walked off. I gave the park one final glance before saying to Ryan, “Yo, I don’t see anyone here that I know, how ‘bout you?”

Ryan shook his head, “Nah all our peoples are already gettin’ their dance on.” We continued on our way to The Roxy hand and hand, “You had me dying earlier wearing that wig yo that shit was mad funny...and I found out something else about you too.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

He pinched my cheek, “That you look cute in anything.”

I smiled at him trying to contain my overflowing feelings of love, even though it was still foreign to me in so many ways it found my soul and dragged it out of its hiding place. I still hadn’t figured out how to love myself, yet my love for him grew stronger every day so it has proved to be the most powerful force I’ve ever encountered. Love cannot be denied and I guess that’s why a person can love without ever understanding it. “Yeah, the way everyone was looking at me, that shit was hilarious,” we laughed recalling their faces.

When we got to The Roxy the line was still pretty long but we spotted Pete way ahead of us and called out his name as we continued to walk toward him. We stood with him and his girlfriend Vicki whom I knew pretty well after the hugs we dived into conversation.

Vicki wanted to know the details of my fallout with Lauren and while I was busy breaking down the circumstances surrounding that I could hear Ryan lining things up with Pete for tomorrow. Pete wanted to move in with Vicki and needless to say she couldn’t be happier.

Before we knew it we were at the door paying to get inside and after we brought our e’ we decided to split up since we

had so much k' to sell. That way we could cover more territory and within a few hours I was delighted to be sold out and hanging out with a new friend I'd made. I hadn't seen Ryan all night but I wasn't surprised when I heard his voice in my ear.

"Where you been at? I been looking all over for you, Sameer's set just started," he told me.

I turned around and gave him a quick kiss feeling tickled by his jealousy, I knew his new interest in DJ Sameer was because Matt had known who my favorite DJ was and he hadn't. I felt touched by that as I smiled and played with the collar of his polo shirt, "Thanks baby I didn't even peep that shit, I guess I was too busy chillin' with—." I reached behind me and grabbed her hand pulling her over to us as I said, "Christie."

She smiled at him, "Hi."

While he hugged her I said, "She's mad cute right?"

He gave me a quick nod yes seeming a bit surprised as he leaned closer to my ear and asked, "We're rolling with her when this is over?"

"Yup yup," I answered then he looked at her again then back at me and gave me another smile of approval. Placing my arm around her I said, "See, don't you think my man's sexy?" I knew he loved it when I complemented him around the ladies.

She giggled, "Yeah, he's a cutie."

"Thank you," he smiled and put his arm around her too.

I looked past her into his eyes, "Christie wants to be down with our little threesome tonight."

Christie let out a shy bout of laughter, "Is that cool with you guys?"

"Umm yeah I think we can do that, right sweet pea?" He asked me with a wink.

My eyelids were halfway shut due to my ecstasial state as I slid my arm around Ryan's waist. Smiling lazily I joked, "Word, you know my stilo kid."

"You look like you're e'ing pretty hard and I know how you do. We better get on the dance floor cuz if you stay in one spot too long you ain't moving 'til the party's over." Ryan grabbed my hand and pulled me so I happily followed his lead to the dance floor with Christie right behind us.

Just as I'd predicted once she saw how well Ryan danced she was all over him I watched them for a while before moving close to his ear, "I got rid of all my k', you?"

He nodded, "Yeah and I made plans to meet up with Pete tomorrow so we can move in."

Ryan gave me a big smile and I did a little celebratory dance as he took my hand and spun me around. Christie slid next to me doing a girly pop locking two-step, her dance was mad cute and unique especially when she'd break into a spin and her ponytail would pinwheel. Now I knew exactly why her shirt had sleeves that were a bit too long for her little arms, it was a part of her dance. Her dance style impressed me and just like with any raver her dance wouldn't have looked good on anyone else. We danced until the DJ's set was over ecstatic that we'd made the money we needed to get a place of our own, everything was working out perfectly.

When the party ended we walked out of the club still saying goodbye to people every step of the way. Our voices echoing in the silence of the early morning air while I promised everyone that we'd meet back up with them at the park.

Christie slowed her car down and searched for a parking spot looking on both sides of the street. I looked behind me before saying, "You just passed a spot right there."

Christie laughed, "Oh." She placed the car in reverse and backed into the vacant spot.

She turned off the engine as Ryan looked at me and said, "You don't wanna go do you?" He lit a cigarette and passed it to me.

"Not really, I'm tired," I said pulling a little baggy of crystal out of my pocket, I took a bump and passed it to Ryan.

"C'mon Rama don't even start with that shit you the one that said you wanted to come here," Christie pointed that out before she got out the car. Ryan got out behind her and slammed the door, I sucked my teeth and hopped out too then he placed his arm around me and we walked through the park's entrance. There were ravers everywhere sitting, standing around, dancing and smoking cigarettes or blunts while they conversed and laughed. My eyes immediately started to scan the scattered crowd but my attention was diverted to the voice that came from behind and called out to Ryan.

Ryan turned around then slid his arm off my shoulder to give the tall man a hug, "Yo what up bro', you snuck out to a rave?"

Surprise was all over my face as I examined Ryan's brother, he definitely had Ryan beat by a few inches but the way his super straight brown hair fell past his ears made him look a bit dorky. He seemed like a really nice guy who was undoubtedly happy to see his little brother and judging by how engaged in conversation they were Ryan was pretty happy to see him too. I stood in the distance watching along with Christie and wondering how it came to be that they were both brothers yet rarely spoke, how was it that they were both ravers but didn't hang together. I was caught off guard when Greg looked back at me and smiled then Ryan gestured for me to

come over to them. I approached with a smile, "What's up, your Greg right?" I leaned in for a hug, "Hi, I'm Rama."

I could tell he was fucked up, on what I didn't know but then again we were all fucked up on something so what did it matter. His speech was a bit slurred as he spoke, "Nice to meet you, wow you're mad adorable yo." He looked back at Ryan, "Yo your girlfriend is very beautiful lil' bro'."

Ryan smiled at me, "I know, this is my sweet pea right here." Greg's eyes were searching the park, Ryan noticed, "Who you looking for?"

"I thought that dude over there was Corey that's who I came out here with. I told him I'd meet up with him at his car cuz I gotta get back before mom and dad get home." He pointed outside the park towards where they were parked, "We're parked right over there—, oh shit there he is."

I looked his way and saw a guy leaned up against a car talking to some girls just as Ryan said, "C'mon I'll walk with you."

Greg gave me another hug goodbye and said, "I hope to see you again soon."

"Me too," I agreed then I watched them walk out the park. Christie walked back over to me pouting so I asked her, "What's wrong with you?"

"I just feel tired all of a sudden," she shielded her eyes from the sun and looked at me. "When Ryan gets back you wanna go get a hotel room?"

"Who's paying?" I asked through a creased brow.

"I'll just put it on my card," she told me with the wave of her hand.

## 10.

Later that evening I awoke to a conversation Ryan was having with Christie, he was sitting in the chair by the hotel phone. She was sitting with her legs crossed like a pretzel on the carpet in front of him smoking a cigarette and looking up at him as if he were a God. She asked him about a phone call he'd just made, I knew he must have called Pete when he said, "We 'bouta take over my boys apartment."

I continued peeking from beneath the white sheets at them, I didn't like the way Christie was hanging onto his every word. It made me feel a little regretful like maybe I'd made a mistake by inviting her into our relationship. Even though I played along I always felt a little remorse when I shared the man I love with another woman but it was the way she looked at him with such a sparkle in her eye that made me feel so uncomfortable.

"Where abouts?" She inquired as she flicked her ashes on the floor beside her.

"The East Village," he told her happily.

I sat up wanting to join in and end their personal conversation although my voice hadn't woke up yet I spoke through the scratchiness, "Pete's filthy ass apartment in Alphabet City."

"He lost his job so he can't afford to keep it," Ryan tacked on before walking over to me and kissing my forehead. "Did you sleep good sweet pea?"

I stretched my arms, "Hells yeah, these sheets are mad comfy."

"You guys can afford a NYC apartment?" Christie interrupted.

"That shit is mad cheap, it's not like we're getting' a place in SOHO. It's a plus that we ain't gotta worry about no security deposit since we taking over his lease and he already paid that shit when he moved in," Ryan added.

"His place is like about as big as a walk in closet so it's affordable." I leaned into Ryan, "You called him?"

"Yeah, he's waiting for us to come through," he explained.

"You guys are leaving now?" Christie asked sadly as she got up from the floor and stood in front of us.

"Yeah, why you wanna roll?" I asked her.

She shook her head, "I'll drop you guys off but I gotta get back to Philly, that's not my car it's my mom's."

"Damn you're from Philly I thought you was from around here," I told her with wide eyes as I grabbed my toothbrush out of my back pack and headed to the bathroom.

She laughed, "You guys are actin' like I said I'm from Canada or sumthin. What? You guys never been to Philly before?"

"Nah never," Ryan explained to her as he counted his money again.

I spit water into the sink before yelling from the bathroom, "Nope we ain't never been out the state of New York." When I was done freshening up we checked out of the hotel.

We were at Pete's place within the hour hugging Christie goodbye before we hopped out of the car and went inside the building. After we reached the fourth floor we continued

down the hall to the last door and with each step we took the Jungle music that was coming from inside Pete's apartment got a little louder. Ryan banged on his door a few times before Pete open it and we were hit with a blast of music as we exchanged hugs. We had to step around open boxes while walking inside and I couldn't help but notice that the place was an absolute mess. Pete tossed some papers off the couch and patted the cushion, "Have a seat guys."

"What the deal Pete?" I asked as I sat next to Ryan.

"Chillin' I'm pretty much done with this shit." He went in the kitchen, grabbed three beers then he looked around his apartment with his eyes while he handed us one, "I mean you guys can toss all this shit, sorry 'bout the mess."

Ryan was looking through his collection of rave flyers that were spread out all around us. I raised my eyebrows and took a sip of the ice cold brew before saying, "We needed something a.s.a.p. so this shit works just fine. Nah, fuck that this shit's perfect."

"No doubt, aye yo I was just about to do some crystal if ya'll wanna join," he offered as he took a seat opposite me.

I got excited then, "Hook that shit up kid."

We put on some music, did a few lines and helped him with his packing while we talked nonstop about any and everything under the sun. When Vicki finally arrived she did a few lines herself and joined in on our conversation.

Pete was complaining about the struggles of a DJ, "Yo, I got booked to spin in the bathroom that's some bullshit right there."

I busted out laughing, "Damn I ain't even know they had DJ's in the bathroom. We'll come hang and support you tho' I planned on going to that party anyway. Besides I like the shit you be spinnin', I'mma fan."

Pete laughed and pointing at me for a second, “Yeah Rama you go off when I spin that La India record.”

I threw my hands up, “That’s my shit.” Then I did a quick liquid dance as the imaginary beat played in my head.

Pete finally finished packing and we helped them load his things into Vicki’s car. He left a lot of items behind so we only had to make two trips up and down the stairs before saying our goodbyes. The summer night’s breeze caressingly blew against my skin while I followed Ryan back inside.

Now that Pete and Vicki were gone it was quiet, it was empty too now that all those boxes left along with him and most importantly it was finally ours. I threw my arms in the air, “Yeah boy, this is our crib now.” Ryan pulled me toward him and we did a little jig in celebration of our accomplishment.

Pete left us his futon bed, two chairs and his stereo besides that not much more could really fit in the place. The kitchen and bedroom were separated by a long counter and there was a small bathroom to the left. That’s all there was to the place but it was all we’d ever dreamed of and it looked even better since I’d shined it up.

We wanted to enjoy our new crib but we needed to re-up so we were getting ready to go to Spanish Harlem. The thick cigarette smoke clouded our tiny apartment and made me take a few steps toward the open window in an attempt to catch some of the breeze as it blew inside. I looked around, “Damn, Pete ain’t leave us not one single fan.”

Ryan stood up slowly, “Let’s buy some on our way back.”

I nodded as I reached for the house keys that were sitting on the kitchen counter. Ryan walked up and hugged me from behind, I leaned back into him smiling, “Yeah, lets buy a fan on our way back to our crib, our crib—I can’t believe it.”

He laughed softly in my ear, “This is our place sweet pea.” I slid the keys into my pocket and as I did this Ryan caught sight of my arm. He brushed his two fingers over my skin, “Where’d you get that big ass bruise?”

My eyes went down to the big purple and black mark, “Oh my god, that’s from the hotel room when I tripped and hit the arm of the chair.”

“Damn you ain’t even hit it that hard,” he shook his head sadly. “That comes from not having any nutrients and shit in your body. How long has it been since you ate sumthin’?” He rested his chin on my shoulder and playfully squeezed my waist.

I put on a cute face and pretended to think really hard while I slid around in his arms so that we were face to face. I wrapped my arms around his neck, “Umm I dunno, like two days ago.”

“That’s not good, your body needs food or you’re gonna end up passin’ out or sumthin’.” He expressed his concerns adamantly before turning away and opening the refrigerator. After he scanned the bare shelves he looked back at me, “Wanna go to Mickey D’s?”

I laughed tiredly, “I know I need to eat but I’m not really hungry.” He slammed the fridge shut while I said, “We was just doin’ all that crystal baby there’s no way I can eat.”

Concern covered his face now, “I know but you gotta eat sweet pea, that’s the meth just making you think that you don’t need to eat.” He pulled me close again and we exchanged a warm embrace before we left out the front door.

“Okay, but what if I try to force it down and throw up instead? That would be embarrassing,” I tossed that thought at him as I locked the door behind us.

"You won't, you'll actually feel better," he assured me. I agreed to it on one condition, that we go to our favorite diner. They gave free refills on their coffee and were never overcrowded. Ryan agreed expressing his fondness for that place as well and when we got there we ordered cheeseburgers and fries.

I must have smoked my entire pack of cigarettes in the hour or so that we'd sat there watching the passerby's out of the huge glass window while nibbling on our food. I stirred my shiny onyx coffee while we talked about parties and our future amongst other things. I dreamingly stuffed another french fry in my mouth, "After we get married our first baby's name is gonna be Riana, that's like a cross between Ryan and Ramia."

He smiled as he dipped a fry into my ketchup, "I like that, that's hot."

I secretly admired the way his eyes squinted when he smiled then he placed his hand over mine and looked into my eyes. He added seriousness to his voice as he spoke, "We should stop fuckin' with drugs, like all the heavy shit and just stick to smokin' and drinkin'. I mean we got a opportunity right here to stack some paper. I'll figure it out, how to pay for you to go to FIT and be a fashion designer...I'll figure that shit out."

"K' ain't that bad either," I added with a bit of a laugh at first but I knew he wasn't joking.

He nodded, "K's aiight but no crystal, no coke, no ex."

I sipped my warm nutty drink, "Alright, okay, yeah let's do it, fuck all that we can't stack paper if we keep spending it on drugs anyway."

I nodded as a rush of excitement ran through me feeling like we were taking a new step into adulthood. It was something

I'd never even thought about before now but a drug free life wouldn't be a problem because he was my drug now. "I was a ghost before I met you just a ghost roaming around, ya know. But now I'm different," I ate another fry then I went back to watching the people as they passed by the window. "The only thing that's important in my life is you, fuck everything else. We gotta keep our crib and after I get meth out my system I'mma get my job back too." I took a long last sip of my coffee before we got ready to leave.

We walked out of the diner hand in hand and after a few blocks Ryan said, "It might not be all that easy but we're just gonna help each other through it."

I smiled to myself his mind was still wrapped around our new vision just like me, "I promise to try my hardest just like when I promised to never fuck with dope again, I did that shit and I'mma do this too."

"I promise too," he added and brought the back of my hand up to his lips giving it a quick kiss before we crossed the street.

I opened my mouth a crack and breathed in deeply then released the NYC air back out of my nostrils as if that finalized our decision. I knew that seeing me all bruised up made him afraid for me and even though I've always bruised easily he may have good reason to be.

The train to Spanish Harlem was about to close its doors when we finally reached it but a kind stranger held it open with his foot for us. We hurried into the car and I felt different already I knew that there wasn't anything that I couldn't do as long as he held my hand, I knew he'd never lead me somewhere I didn't want to be and I knew that I could trust him completely.

Ryan was a little concerned that because of our detour to the diner we'd missed Hector but I explained that Hector stood outside everyday all day. "Running sales is his job."

He seemed relieved when I spotted Hector about a half a block away, I squeezed his hand, "There he goes by the payphones."

"You wan't me to wait in the restaurant?" Ryan asked as we got closer and the delicious scents of Spanish cooking filled our nostrils.

"No, you should meet him that way if you ever need to come alone it's not a problem." I looked over at him halfway expecting for him to be nervous but of course he wasn't, he was never nervous about anything.

Hector spotted us in no time and greeted us with a smile before walking around the corner. I stopped at one of the lighted payphones and pretended to make a call pushing the buttons slowly until Hector came back and sat the Styrofoam cup on top of the phone.

"You doin' aiight out here mami?" He asked me but his eyes were glued to Ryan.

"Yeah papi." I turned to face Ryan, "This is my man Ryan right here."

Ryan gave him a pound, "What up? How you?"

"What up? You keepin' her safe right?" Hector asked him but I could see he felt better knowing that I wasn't alone.

Ryan smiled as he nodded, "Yeah, that's my heart right there."

"Aiight, that's what's up." He raised his eyebrows and added jokingly, "You know her moms a Queen pin right?"

Ryan smiled in agreement as Hector continued, "So if she finds out I'm dealin' with her little princess she's gonna kill

me, ya heard? So you gotta keep her safe man," he let out a serious kind of laugh.

"No doubt," Ryan assured him as he slid his arm around me.

I giggled as I spoke, "Don't worry so much Hector, I'm good."

Hector laughed, "Aiight, juz give me a call when you got dat."

I gave Hector a nod goodbye then he disappeared around the corner and I pretended to make another phone call. After a few minutes I grabbed the cup and we walked away stopping to purchase two fans before we got home.

When we were finally comfortable we got to work, I pulled the powdered lactaid out of my bag and began cutting it into the coke with two playing cards. After Ryan bagged it up and counted the little baggies I said, "Damn that's the rent money and then some right there and if we get rid of all that this weekend that should be about what we bring in every weekend."

Ryan placed the baggies inside of a small wooden cigar box then placed the box on top of the kitchen cabinet out of sight. "Yeah, we gotta start lettin' people know we got it."

"Yeah we gotta put the word out and shit, are we gonna go out tonight?" I asked him as I sat in front of the fan and sorted through my party flyers searching for all the raves happening this weekend.

"I'm tired tonight," He let me know as he took off his sneakers and got into the bed.

I sat the flyers on the window seal, "So am I, that rave "One Love" is tomorrow night anyway that's gonna be off the hook." I kicked my shoes off and climbed into bed with him yawning, "We need to catch up on our sleep." I lay on Ryan's

chest and looked into his eyes, “Franks gonna drop our bags off tomorrow?”

His voice was an exhausted whisper, “Yeah.”

My lips kissed his chin before I sank my head into his chest, “I love you Ryan.”

He stroked my head, “I love you too sweet pea.”

Sleep quickly crept its way into our bed and we slept through the night and most of the next day. It was late in the evening when I finally woke up Ryan had been awake way before me and ordered take-out that happened to arrive almost exactly when I got out of the shower. He waited until I got dressed before we sat down and ate dinner together, it was close to midnight by the time we left.

There wasn’t a line since the rave had started a few hours ago but we had a product no one else seemed to have that night so we didn’t miss the rush. Ryan and I split up after a while but I knew he’d sold out because he was sending people over to me. They’d say “Your man told me to come see you,” and I was all business until no one needed any more only then did I relax and mingle. That’s when I ran into Christie, she was practically begging to chill with us afterwards but I wasn’t so sure I wanted her to. I avoided the question and led her to the dance floor instead I hadn’t gotten a chance to dance all night. Excitement ran through me as soon as I stepped onto the floor and we danced to song after song, moving every inch of my body to the beat. Christie disappeared after a while saying something about going to the bathroom but I could hardly hear her over the bass.

As soon as she walked away some kids that I didn’t know that well walked up to me asking, “Have you seen Denise yet?”

I lowered my eyebrows, “No, I didn’t even know she was here.”

“She was over there looking for you earlier,” They explained pointing to the opposite side of the dance floor.

I thanked them and walked in that direction I hadn’t run into Denise at a party for quite some time and I was excited to see her. I searched for her in the dimmest of light and finally found her sitting on the floor by a speaker that stood taller than me. She had a spaced out look on her face as I knelt down beside her, “Yo, Denise what you take tonight girl?”

At first she seemed startled like she didn’t recognize me but she relaxed as I continued, “Get up off the floor, who’d you come with?” I saw her messenger bag lying on the floor behind her so I grabbed it as I helped her to her feet. She didn’t answer me though she never said anything but at least she was able to stand with little assistance, “C’mon Denise let’s be out.”

She followed behind me slowly and I kept a tight grip on her arm helping her steady herself at times as I navigated through the nightclub. While we made our way toward the exit I ran back into Ryan, as soon as he saw me he stopped talking to his friends and rushed over.

His eyes went straight to Denise, “What she take?”

“I don’t even know, I don’t know who she came with or nothing, I don’t know if she’s overdosing or what. All I know is I can’t leave her like this anything could happen to her.” I took a few deep breaths and blinked a few times attempting to sober myself up some.

“You’re not fucked up are you?” He asked as he searched my eyes.

“No, I mean I did two bumps earlier.” I saw the disappointment in his face so I got more specific with my lie,

"No, not glass I just bumped some k'." Denise leaned into me weakly and moaned a little, I raised my eyebrows helplessly at him.

Ryan held her bag for me as he said, "Bring her back to our place she probably needs to sleep it off, I heard it's some bad shit going around tonight." He turned to his friends and waved bye as I tugged on his shirt to get his attention again when I had it I asked, "Is Christie coming with us?" I really didn't want her to come with us but I knew we needed a ride.

He looked around for a minute before eventually spotting her then he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Christie!" She was looking around staring blankly so he put his hand up in the air and gestured for her to come over to us.

She hurried over asking, "What happened?"

Ignoring her question Ryan commanded, "Go get your car and meet us in front."

Christie went ahead of us and Denise was moving so slow that it took us a pretty long time to exit the building, but at least she was moving. When we were finally outside Christie was already pulling up, she hopped out and held the door to the backseat open while Ryan helped me get Denise inside then we rode away.

"Oh my god what happened to her?" Christie asked again.

"I'm not sure but I think she took some bad shit," I explained as I tried to get Denise to lift her head back up but her eyes kept rolling up in her head, I settled for her laying her head on my shoulder instead.

When we got home, Ryan carried her up the steps and put her in our bed. He tapped her cheek a little and spoke loudly, "Denise can you hear me? What you take?"

She didn't respond, I looked at him, "She hasn't said a word, you think she's okay?" Taking a seat on the floor next to the foot of the futon I hugged my knees full of worry.

"I don't know, I never took no bad shit before," he told me never taking his eyes off her as he sat at the edge of the bed.

"Me neither," I informed him.

"Yeah for the past like two weekend's people been saying that it's some bad ex' going around," Christie added.

Ryan nodded, "Yeah I told Rama that it was definitely some of that shit going around tonight." He looked at me and gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze, "She gonna be aiight, she just gotta sleep it off."

I straightened the place up while we smoked a blunt and listened to music, tossing a stack of magazines onto the kitchen counter as I said aloud but to no one in particular, "The rave scene is changing." My eyes gravitated toward Denise who looked like a flawless china doll as she slept, knowing in the back of my mind that she could possibly never wake up, "I really hoped that this day would never come but I gotta face the facts, the magic is disappearing." Her leg did a quick jerk and my heart jumped into my throat for a moment thinking that she was about to go into a seizure but nothing more happened. Ryan was scared for her too I could tell, maybe we could bring her to the hospital—I shook the thought out of my head, if we bring her to the hospital what kind of friend would I be? If it turned out to be nothing and she survives her father would know she was a raver and her life would be over regardless.

After washing the last dish I left out the kitchen and joined them in the living room again. They were sitting there quietly zoned out bopping their heads to the music, I frowned my eyebrows, "Back in the day there weren't any people walking

around with big ass letter E's on their hats selling bad shit but lately it's been happening more and more."

Christie coughed a few times as she leaned forward and passed the blunt to me then she said, "It don't seem no different to me, I ain't been raving all that long tho'. My first rave was the one they had underneath the Brooklyn Bridge."

Ryan laughed, "Voyager?"

I smiled, "Voyager one or two?"

Christie put up two fingers and Ryan smiled with a raised eyebrow, "That's was April 95' Christie you're still mad new to this shit. Me and Rama been in the scene since 92' and the shit has definitely changed it's still changing it's getting too main stream now."

I sat beside him on the tip of the futon as I handed him the blunt, "Word up that's what I'm sayin', we went to Voyager 1, 1 ½ and 2 but like in the beginning you couldn't even go to a wack rave, there was no such thing. Now it's like fifteen of them going on all on the same night and mad posers poppin' out from all over the place, mad little ass kids runnin' around and shit. Way too many hustlers too cuz I damn sure use to be able to make way more money than this in one night," I pulled the money and my unsold twenties of coke out of my pocket and handed it all to Ryan.

Ryan laughed as he added his money to it, "I know right, shit moves mad slow now." He counted the money before going into the kitchen, putting it into the cigar box and placing it back on top of the cabinet.

I leaned toward Denise and placed the back of my hand on her forehead she'd been sleeping for a while now but she didn't feel hot or anything so I left her be. The rest of the night was chased away by the sun and with each passing hour it got brighter and hotter.

Denise finally woke up and sat up slowly looking around before attempting to fix her messy hair although it looked stunning to me. She kept blinking as if that would jumpstart her brain and it may have helped because she seemed to come to her senses rather quickly. I gave her a cup of cold water and she thanked me in a strained voice before gulping it down thirstily.

Denise scooted over and I sat down beside her, “Are you okay?”

“What you do last night?” Ryan jumped in as he took her empty cup.

She raised an eyebrow and tried to fix her hair again, “It was suppose to be e’ but that was some bad shit. When I ran into Matt earlier he told me that you guys were up in there so when I first started feeling weird I knew I shouldn’t be by myself so I started looking for you.”

I looked at Ryan, “Did you see Matt? I didn’t know he was there.”

Ryan nodded, “Yeah I saw him like when we first got there he was on the dance floor.” He looked back at Denise, “Who’d you buy it off?”

She brought her knees to her chest, “Those guys walking around with the silver letter E on their baseball caps.”

Ryan sucked his teeth, “Them muthafuckas, they not even ravers.”

“Know your sources man,” Christie budded in from the floor where she’d been sitting at in the far corner of the room.

Denise looked over at her, “Hey, whats up? I didn’t even see you over there.”

“Oh Denise this is Christie,” I said a little irritated with Christie’s interference in our conversation.

Christie smiled at her, "Nice to meet you, I'm glad you're okay."

Denise brought her attention back to me, "Thanks yo, damn what if you ain't find me."

"Please girl, some kids told me you were looking for me and I knew something had went down, I wouldna left without findin' your ass," I assured her.

"I know one thing, I will never buy shit off someone I don't know again," her eyes went to the clock radio on the kitchen counter. "Oh shit, is that the right time?"

Ryan let out a little laugh, "Yeah, you was knocked out for a minute."

"Why? You gotta work today?" I asked her as she hopped off the bed and slid into her sneakers still trying to situate her hair.

"Yeah, I gotta catch the train to Brooklyn." Her eyes got big, "My bag, shit my fuckin' bag."

"Ryan grabbed it off the hook on the bathroom door and sat it beside her, "There it go."

She looked inside and smiled, "Sweet, I didn't lose my wallet, that's a good thing. Where are we anyway?"

"Alphabet City, this is Pete's old apartment." I said as I put my sneakers on, "I'll walk you to the subway cuz I need some stogies from the store anyway."

Ryan grabbed the house keys off the kitchen counter and looked back at Christie, "We'll be back."

Denise wiped the sleep out of her eyes and ran her finger through her hair a few more times, "Wow congrats on the new place guys, sorry I'm so busy worrying about myself—."

I cut her off, "It's all good, you can come through any time." "No doubt," Denise agreed as we all left out the front door.

We walked Denise to the nearest subway station and waited for the train with her. She tossed the hood of her sweater over her head attempting to cover up her wispy jet black hair but it was no use her hair was peeking out from everywhere even getting in her way while she tried to smoke her cigarette.

Denise could murder a dance floor with her vicious moves but she was also the kindest person I'd ever met. What if I'd lost my friend last night she would have become just another victim to the rave scene, I mean that's all I hear about nowadays. They'd tell you that someone just died the night before and get right back to sniffing their drugs like it was nothing, it was like no one really cared.

The hissing sound of Denise's train coming to a complete stop pulled me out of my thoughts, I gave her a loving hug and so did Ryan then we watched her get on the car.

When we got back to the apartment Christie was covered in blankets she stuck her finger out and signaled for use to come over. Ryan and I looked at each other and laughed then we climbed under the sheets too.

When I awoke later on that night Ryan and Christie hadn't gotten up yet and I decided to jump in the shower. The warmth of the water felt so good hitting my skin that I took my time getting out then wrapped myself in a towel. I opened the door allowing the steam to escape along with me and walked through the dark little apartment. The dim lights of the city on the other side of the window kept the place from being completely black so I was able to see where I was going. I tip toed pass the futon quietly but stopped dead in my tracks when I noticed that the bag of crystal that I'd placed on the nightstand before I got in the shower was missing. My eyes went straight to Christie and I saw that her closed eyes were

blinking I wanted to say something to her but I didn't want Ryan to know that I hadn't kept my promise. I finished getting dressed while she pretended to be asleep but the rage was slowly building within me with each second that passed and eventually I slapped my hand on the wall and yelled, "What the fuck!"

Ryan woke up and Christie sat up quickly as I yelled again, "Where's the rest of my crystal?"

Christie laughed, "Oh that, I got up while you were in the shower and did it, it wasn't that much it barely made two lines."

"You really gonna do my shit without asking me or even offering me any, that's some fucked up shit, yo," I yelled furiously. Then I grabbed her bag off the chair and threw it on the floor, "Get the fuck out you stupid bitch."

"What the fuck? Ryan why are you letting her talk to me like that?" She asked while she walked toward me.

"Why would my man have your back get it through your muthafuckin' head, he's mines bitch," as soon as she was close enough I smacked her.

She grabbed the side of her face, "Why'd you hit me bitch? Why are you acting like this? Over some fuckin' meth?"

Ryan was out the bed and in my face whispering, "Chill out, yo. I thought you didn't do any meth at the club?"

I ignored him and continued to yell at Christie, "Why'd I hit you? You walked up on me, like you wanted it bitch so I gave it to you." Her shocked expression made me break out in laughter.

"I was picking my bag up that you threw on the floor, god what is wrong with you. One minute you're telling me that I'm your girl and the next you're smacking me in the face," she glared at me angrily.

I continued to taunt her, “That was until I realized that you’re a wack ass bitch, your pussy was always wack and the way you’re constantly smiling up in my mans face is wack as shit. You wish you could have him all to yourself but it’s not goin’ down bitch so stop trying so damn hard.”

Ryan got close to me as if we were hugging and held my hand down that I’d been using to point in her face. He whispered, “Rama, chill out yo, Christie didn’t do anything wrong.”

“What? Why are you trying to defend this bitch?” I whispered but my anger made it come out louder than I’d planned. “You love this bitch now?”

I snatched my hand away from his and backed up shaking my head then I slid into my sneakers, ran out the door and raced down the steps ignoring his calls from behind.

I couldn’t deal with this anymore I mean did I even have the right to be angry since I condoned this type of behavior by allowing her into our bed? He must have developed feelings for that bitch and the idea of him loving anyone but me was too unbearable to believe. I needed some fresh air to clear my head because I couldn’t see past my anger anymore and all I wanted at this point was to bash Christie’s face in.

I rode the train all the way to Brooklyn and found myself at Shane and Chris’s door drying my eyes while I knocked. Chris looked very surprised to see me, “Oh shit what’s up Fajita, come in.”

“Hey Chris,” I greeted him sadly while I walked inside. He closed the door and gave me a hug as I looked around. “Where’s Shane?”

“At Tara’s house I ain’t feel like riding out there tonight, I’m just sitting her getting bodied dolo,” he explained as he

held up the bottle of vodka he had in his hand. “Where’s ya boyfriend at?”

“At home kissing all over that stupid bitch,” I grabbed a glass off his messy table and brought it over to the sink. After rinsing it out I held the wet glass out toward him, “Lemme get some.”

Chris poured the liquid into my cup with a raised eyebrow, “Wait, he’s not your man no more?”

“Yeah of course he’s my man, we just had a manaj going on with this bitch who obviously wants to cut me out of the fuckin’ picture,” I frowned my face up as I took a sip of the strong liquor.

Chris wasted no time spewing I told you so’s into every sentence I ignored him and walked over to the stereo. “You ain’t got no Soulslinger mix tapes?”

Chris grabbed a cassette tape off the top of the refrigerator and tossed it at me, “I bring this back and forth from my car to the crib cuz it’s just that hot.”

After putting the music on I fixed us some more shots and we ended up playing a card game while we sniffed lines of k’. Holding my cards in one hand and a cigarette in the other I rocked my head back and forth to the beat, “Yo remember the last time we played casino?”

He laughed as he threw a card out, “Shit that was a minute ago now, you was only like fourteen then and we stayed home playin’ cards cuz your ass couldn’t get in no fuckin’ clubs.”

“That was then tho’, now they know my face, only a few clubs be givin’ me a hard time now. Like The Limelight and sometimes The Tunnel when they wanna act funny and shit,” I explained and threw a queen of hearts on the table.

There was a knock at the door and I laid my cards down as Chris rushed over and looked out the peek hole. He looked back at me mouthing the words “It’s Ryan.”

I sucked my teeth and nodded that it was okay to let him inside then I stood up unsteadily and stumbled over to the door as it opened.

Ryan stepped inside and hugged me tightly as he spoke, “I knew I’d find you here.”

Chris slammed the door closed and sat back down on the sofa as I tried to push Ryan away but my arms were too weak. When I spoke my words seemed to melt together, “Do you have feelings for her?” Tears started running down my face again.

He still held me close to him as he shook his head, “No I told her to leave.”

That surprised me, “What? You made her leave?”

“She wanted to come with me to look for you and I told her to just go home,” he lowered his voice some. “I don’t want her you know I love you.”

I smiled and kissed him, “But you always want to have threesomes and I just wanted to make you happy.”

“Nah fuck that, you make me happy you and only you. I did wanna see what it was like and we did that, so fuck it we won’t do it no more,” he kissed my forehead before saying. “I love you, yo when you didn’t come back I thought something happened to you. I was about to lose my mind I can’t even imagine my life without you in it.”

I placed my finger over his lips, “Shhh, I overreacted.” Then I kissed him passionately before I said, “I gotta pee!” I hurried into the bathroom and it didn’t seem like I was in there long but it was long enough for Ryan and Chris to get into another argument.

When I heard their raised voices I hurried out of the bathroom and saw that dreaded all too familiar scene of Ryan and Chris in each other's faces having a heated argument once again.

Ryan angrily yelled, "Why would you get her that fucked up? Look at her she's stumbling all over the place."

Chris glanced at me standing by the bathroom door before responding in a raised voice, "Yo, Fajita's a big girl she can make her own decisions. You the one fuckin' other bitches, doin' her dirty not me I care about her too much for that." He moved closer in Ryan's face now with his hands balled into fist.

I rushed toward them but somehow managed to trip over my own foot falling to the floor and making a loud thump. Ryan rushed over and helped me back up as I said, "Let's leave right now, ya'll are trippin'"

Chris threw his hands up in defeat, "Yo, sorry Fajita but your man's on some straight bullshit, you can get as high and as drunk as you wanna get, you're grown and he's treating you like a kid."

As soon as I was back on my feet Ryan left my side and by the time my eyes got to him they were fighting. It all happened so quickly that I didn't even see who threw the first punch they were throwing each other all over the living room. I let out a short scream when they almost fell into me and in the midst of my yelling they finally stopped throwing blows. Ryan was holding onto Chris's shirt and Chris was holding onto his not taking their eyes off of one another as they breathed heavily in anger. It seemed neither wanted to be the first to let the other go but after a few more seconds of this they pushed off of one another and I jumped in front of Ryan, "Ryan please let's just go home."

Ryan didn't say anything but he was out of breath and really upset as he grabbed my arm and pulled me with him to the front door. I noticed that Chris's lip was bleeding and I wanted to stay and make sure that he was okay but I couldn't see any way to do that without adding insult to injury so I followed Ryan out the door and never looked back.

When our feet hit the pavement I stopped and yanked my arm from his grip, "Ryan will you please slow down, lemme see your face, are you okay?"

He slowed down some seeming to have regained his composer just that quick. "I'm sorry."

I examined his face quickly before saying, "No it's all my fault I shouldna neva even came here." I touched my head, "Ugh, and I feel dizzy."

He put his arm around me, "Lean on me, lets walk slow—"

I bent over as an overwhelming feeling to nausea suddenly hit me then I upchucked everything in my stomach all over the pavement. "Oh my god, I feel horrible," I pulled a napkin out of my pocket and wiped my mouth as I continued to walk although I felt weak.

"You alright sweet pea?" Ryan asked me before flagging down a cab.

I was happy to see the cab pull over because I needed to sit down, "Yeah I'll be fine let's just go home." He held the door open for me and as I slid inside my world started spinning all over again. Once the cab was in motion, I leaned my head against the window and shut my eyes as I spoke softly, "I'm sorry Ryan."

"Stop saying that." He sighed stroking my hair, "I love you... fuck everything else."

When the cab dropped us off Ryan had to carry me up the steps and into the bed he helped me undress then he tucked me in and I passed out.

The sunlight crept inside through the slits in the blinds illuminating the tiny apartment and awakening me from my dreamless sleep. I turned onto my stomach and pushed my face into the pillow wanting to sleep a little longer but knowing that it wasn't going to happen made me eventually give in. My eyes popped open feeling the intensity of my hangover setting in while I thought about everything that happened last night. I poked my lips out and whined a little then I slapped my forehead, "Ow." I shook Ryan's shoulder, "Ryan? Are you up baby? I'm sorry for the way I acted yesterday."

Ryan put the pillow over his face and mumbled something as he rolled over. I sat up and the next time I blinked a tear fell out of my eye, "I was actin' like a straight addict last night." I sniffed and wiped my nose with my hand, "I don't wanna be like that."

Ryan breathed deeply as he pushed himself up by his arms, "Sweet pea, don't get yourself all upset, that shit don't matter." Then he sat up all the way and rested his chin on my shoulder, "You want some coffee from the bodega downstairs?"

I smiled and nodded yes as he wiped the tears from my face then he pecked my forehead. I put my hand over it to check for a fever as I said, "I gots a major hangover."

Ryan got up and went into the bathroom I could hear the running water just before I heard something else, a bird. There was a pigeon on the window seal, I wanted to lift the screen and sit some bread out for it but the black wrought iron bars that were fixed to it would complicate things. I stared at it

and it stared back at me for a moment then Ryan was back in front of me putting his sneakers on.

"I'll be right back," He said before kissing me on the cheek and leaving out the door.

My eyes returned to the window but the pigeon had already gone back to soaring the skies, I reached my hand out toward the window and whispered to myself, "I envy you little birdie, I'd love to be able to fly whenever I wanted." Then I stood up on the tip of my toes and stretched my arms into the air before grabbing my head and wincing in pain. I sat back down and after a few more minutes the front door opened and Ryan walked back in holding two cups of coffee.

"Hey baby," I said dryly as he handed me one of the Styrofoam cups and took a seat beside me.

"I figured that was gonna happen, you were fucked up last night," He pulled a small bottle of aspirin out of his pocket, opened it and handed me two.

I blew air at the hot liquid before sipping down my two pills down with it then I let out a bout of worn giggles as I said, "I'm never drinking again, I hardly remember anything." My eyes widen as I noticed the swelling above Ryan's left eyebrow then the memories came back to me, "Oh my God you and Chris got into it, what the fuck happened?"

"Yo if you woulda seen how fucked up he had you, I mean your pupils were mad dilated and all I could think was that he was gonna try to sleep with you if I hadn't shown up. I know how guys think," he stared off shaking his head before taking a few sips of his coffee.

I sucked my teeth at the thought, "Eww Chris, please I woulda punched him dead in his mouth he knows better than to try some shit like that with me."

He raised an eyebrow, “He’s not as innocent as you think Rama.”

“You right, I know.” I sipped some more of the hot liquid before sucking my teeth once more, “Fuck Chris.”

“Fuck Chris and Christie,” he shook his head.

I got up and grabbed my pack of cigarettes off the counter putting one in my mouth as I looked around, “I have no fuckin’ idea where I left my lighter.”

Ryan pulled a lighter out of his pocket and lit my cigarette, “Wanna go food shopping later?”

“Yeah but there’s just one problem, you don’t know how to cook,” he joked.

“Umm, yeah actually I don’t but I can read the back of the box, duh,” I explained. “I always wanted to make stuffed shells they are so good, let’s get the shit we need to make that and like some candles or sumthin.”

Ryan smiled at the notion, “Oh dinner by candlelight that sounds very romantic sweet pea.”

I got up, walked into the kitchen and looked around as I placed my cup of coffee on the counter. “We need like paper plates and thangs,” I opened the cabinet underneath the sink. “Well at least we don’t gotta worry about pots, Pete left all of his and they look like they’ve never been used,” I informed him but he was already on his way into the kitchen. He helped me take out the pots and sit them on the counter then our attention was diverted by someone knocking.

We both exchange a who could that be glance before Ryan walked over to the door and asked, “Who is it?” with one of his eyes against the peek hole.

“Pete,” The muffled sound came through the door.

Ryan opened it and Pete walked in wearing a concerned look on his face, “Whats up?”

Pete walked inside closing the door behind him, "Whats up Rama?"

"Hey Pete, I hope you didn't come back for these cuz I really wanna use them tonight," I explained as I held up a pot.

Pete sat down and with a wave of his hand said, "My moms gave them to me." He sucked his teeth, "Like I cook and shit, ya'll can have them."

"Oh thanks," I said happily before taking a seat next to him on the futon.

"Yo Pete what's the deal kid?" Ryan asked taking a seat in the chair.

Pete nodded removing his messenger bag off his shoulders and searching through it while he spoke, "Yo Ryan since you guys don't have a phone I stopped through on my way to work cuz your brother keeps stopping by Vicki's now that he knows I'm living there. They want you to come home, he wants you to call him and shit. I ain't tell him nuthin all I said was that I heard you and your girl got a crib together and shit, but I ain't say nothing about giving you my place or nothing like that."

"I'm good, I'm not calling home or nunna that shit, he know where I be at if we wanna see me," Ryan told him as he leaned back in his chair.

"How? I told you I ain't tell him shit," Pete asked confused.

"He know where I'm at every muthafuckin' Friday," Ryan raised his voice jokingly. "The fuckin' Roxy."

"You want me to tell him that if he comes through again?" Pete asked still searching through his bag.

"Nah you ain't gotta be a messenger and shit, he already know that that's my shit, I'm always there. Why would I go home, my parents just wanna keep me locked in the house and I ain't with that shit." Then Ryan added jokingly, "I'm damn near an adult, I do what I want kid."

We broke out in laughter and Pete added, “Yo you mad independent for sixteen tho’.” He looked over at me, “How old are you Rama?”

I slapped Pete’s knee playfully and told him, “I’m sixteen too but Ryan got me by like two months.”

He pulled out a baggy full of marijuana, “I ain’t gotta be to work for another hour, ya’ll wanna blaze up?”

I clapped my hands twice, “Hells yeah.”

“Yo roll that shit up,” Ryan added with a smile.

We had Pete get us a bottle of wine from the liquor store while we hurried and brought what we needed from the market next door then he dropped us off back home and went to work. We spread a sheet on the floor since we didn’t have a dinner table and I sat two books in the center for a sturdy spot to sit the candles before I lit them. Ryan helped me prepare the food then we sat the pot of stuffed shells and the hot garlic bread on both sides of the candles. I turned the lights off and turned the alarm clock radio to the jazz station before we sat down.

Ryan grabbed his fork and I held out a hand in protest, “Hold up Ryan, I wanna say a poem over our meal. You know it’ll be kinda like saying grace but cooler,” I giggled and Ryan nodded in agreement. Sitting up straight I stared at him and cleared my throat, “Well the only thing to comes to mind is the lyrics of a Depeche Mode song that I love,

“Lead me into your darkness

When this world is trying it’s hardest

To leave me unimpressed

Just one caress

From you and I’m blessed”,

The reason why those words come to my mind is because that’s exactly how I feel. The world is trying its hardest to

leave me unimpressed but just one caress from you and everything's beautiful again...with you... I'm blessed. So I say to you Ryan, lead me into the darkness or lead us into the light it doesn't matter where we go...I'll always follow, I'll hold on with all my might."

We exchanged smiles and tapped our glasses into each other's then we kissed quickly before enjoying our meal. After eating a few bites I said, "Sometimes I think about the rave scene, like how it's changing and shit and it really makes me sad."

Ryan sipped his wine before saying, "All that shit changes and dies out just like the disco scene and the hippies back in the day. This is our time now and it's gonna fade out just the same and something new will rise up. It's a rave, a place where ravers come together in unity just like church, all the Christians gather there and so on and so forth. Everyone's not a raver and the world doesn't get us but we'll forever be who we are with or without a place where we can come together," he explained before stuffing his mouth.

I thought that made a lot of sense as I swallowed another mouth full before saying, "I use to think I'd die without the rave scene because it's the only place where I belong, when I first started raving I was still searching for something but I didn't know what. I was willing to try damn near any drugs even if it killed me cuz that's what I thought my soul was searching for...that right drug. But come to find out that wasn't it at all, my soul was searching for that missing piece of my heart. Well at least I was looking in the right place cuz I found my heart."

"You are my heart too shit I think they're connected, or one and the same. All I know is that I love to see you happy

and don't ever want to see you cry," He told me while lightly brushing his fingers across my face.

I took a sip of my wine, "When I was like fourteen me and Johanna went with our friend Julia to a tattoo parlor cuz she wanted to get a tattoo of her boyfriend's name on her arm. She ended up getting the words "mi corazon" she told me that it meant "my heart". I always thought it must be a language thing like why would she call her boyfriend her heart but that was because I didn't get it yet, I didn't know love yet." I raised my Styrofoam cup and Ryan followed along as I said, "To us, "mi corazon".

Ryan tapped his cup into mine as he added, ""mi corazon"" We drank our wine and enjoyed the rest of the evening.

## 11.

We hadn't been out to a party all week nor had we gotten high, come to think of it we hadn't really socialized at all this week we just enjoyed...us. Friday still came back around pretty quick and it was time for "Together" again we were running low on cash and we had coke that needed to be sold.

"If we get rid of all this tonight we'll call Hector tomorrow, pay him what we owe him and re-up," Ryan reminded me as he got up and walked into the kitchen. He took the cigar box down from the top of the cabinet and looked inside, "Yo, did you do some of the coke?"

"No, you know I don't fuck with that shit it's in the box," I placed my unlit cigarette on the counter as I entered the kitchen to see for myself.

He slammed the box on the counter, "Eight twenties are gone."

I looked inside the box, "But the money is still there?"

"Yeah, all of the money's here," he explained after recounting it. "Christie had to dip into this shit."

"I'mma fuck that bitch up, are you fuckin' serious right now?" I started pacing back and forth thinking about all the opportunities Christie had to take our coke.

"Nobody's been in here but her, and we ain't look in that box since." He took out some of his frustration on the

open cabinet slamming it closed before saying, “You got her number?” He sat back down on the futon and put his head in his hands, “Damn we let Christie get us.”

I knelt down beside my backpack and searched through it tossing things about until I found a small piece of paper, “Here it goes.” I jumped up and slammed the paper on the counter, “Yo do you got change cuz it’s a out of state number?”

“Yeah,” he explained pulling some coins out of his pocket and counting them.

I went in the bathroom and brushed my hair then I slid into my sneakers and said, “Okay, lets go call this fuckin’ bitch.”

We walked to nearest payphone and Ryan leaned against the booth while I dialed. I listened closely as I tried to dull the sounds of the traffic around me by pressing my finger into my ear. An older woman answered, “Hello, may I speak with Christie.”

“Yes just a minute,” the lady told me.

After a few seconds I heard the scratchy sound of Christie’s voice saying, “Hello.”

I tried to make my voice sound interrogating, “What up Christie this is Rama, I cannot believe you right now first you tried to steal my man and you failed at that miserably might I add, so you decide to steal my blow instead?”

There was an awkward silence for a moment then she said, “I did not steal anything from you guys, I would nev—.”

I cut her lies short, “Stop lying bitch if you don’t come up with my shit or my money youbettah not show your face at any rave in NYC. All that love, peace and happiness shit went out the window once you crossed me, I trusted you yo—.”

She cut me off now, “Rama I’m not going to lie to you I took it because I was so fucking mad at you. I thought everything was all good why can’t we just go back to how we were?”

I cut back in, "Cuz you crossed that line, besides three's a fuckin' crowd bitch now do the fuckin' math and bring me my dough."

"Are you going to The Roxy tonight?" She asked nervously.

"Yeah and your ass bettah be there with all my dough, no discounts bitch," I slammed the phone down.

Ryan looked at me with raised eyebrows, "She admitted to it?"

"Yup and she claims she'll have the money for us at "Together" tonight," I informed him laughing with my unlit cigarette hanging from my mouth.

"Yo, you just had to throw that in there," he joked while I stopped a passerby and asked for a light.

After we crossed the busy street I asked, "Umm what? That part about tryna take you from me? C'mon Ryan I think you know my stilo by now," we laughed briefly.

"That means we just caught a eight sale," Ryan added as I passed my burning cigarette to him.

I blew the remaining smoke out of my mouth while saying, "I ain't think she'd do no shit like that, we can't trust nobody." Sliding my hand into his we walked back home.

Later that night we left out earlier than we normally would have so that we could enjoy a slow romantic walk. There was nothing quite like walking through the city on a warm breezy night not to us we were from suburban towns and appreciated every little thing about The Big Apple.

When we finally reached The Roxy the line moved pretty quickly with all the socializing we were doing. After the bouncers patted us down we walked inside, it was crowded as usual and one of the first people we ran into was Shane and Chris.

Chris immediately walked up to Ryan and apologized, "Dude sorry about the other night man, I was wrong for that."

Ryan gave him a pound as he smiled and said, "Squashed."

I was next in line to give Chris a big hug, happy to see him handle the situation in such a mature manor and it made me feel like he really cared about our friendship. "Love ya Chris," I let him know before I moved over and hugged Shane. Then I told them, "I'll catch up with ya'll in a lil' bit, yo have you seen Christie up in here?"

"Yeah, she over there by the bar," Shane said as he pointed in her direction.

Ryan and I headed toward the bar as we exchanged looks of disbelief and I said to him, "Wow you and Chris peaced it up and Christie really came, it's lookin' like a good muthafuckin' night."

Ryan smiled nodding in agreement as we squeezed passed all the people stopping to hug this one and that one along the way. I spotted her just as Ryan tapped my shoulder and said, "There she go right there."

We both watched her chatting it up with two other girls, as we approached they stopped talking and stared at me nervously, "You got that?" I asked Christie attempting to look tough.

She held the money out to me immediately and I snatched it from her while saying, "It bettah all be there bitch." I rolled my eyes and walked away from her with Ryan still by my side and the next thing I knew Frank was too. We exchanged hugs before he told us to come dance with him, I looked at Ryan and said, "You gahead I'mma go in the bathroom and count this I gotta make sure she not tryna get slick. Oh yeah, keep a close eye on that bitch until I do, kay baby." He nodded as

I pulled him close pecking his lips a few times before turning away and entering the restroom.

I locked myself in the first available stall and counted the money after I knew it was all there I shoved the cash deep in my pocket. When I walked back out of the stall I took in a breath of surprise spotting Johanna washing her hands at the sink, "Holy shit, I know that's not my girl right there."

Johanna looked at my reflection in the mirror before quickly turning around and holding her arms out, "Rama, I missed you so much."

We embraced each other as we jumped up and down screaming with excitement, completely oblivious to the other girls in the restroom. After we calmed down a bit I pulled away but never let her arms go and somehow I was able to speak through my huge smile, "I missed you so much, I started thinking that I was never gonna see you again."

"Me too, I'm like so happy right now you don't even know," she explained.

"Who'd you come with?" I asked her curiously.

"I came solo girl, I was like if I ever wanna see Rama I gotta go to "Together" and I never could find anyone to roll with cuz like everyone I know works on Fridays." She told me before asking, "Who are you here with, Lauren?"

I sucked my teeth, "Girl that's a long story, but no I'm not here with her I'm here with my man. You know who he is too cuz you use to go with his brother." I slid my hand into hers, "C'mon I'll introduce yall."

"What's his brother's name?" She asked with and inquisitive smile.

"Greg," I told her excited to hear her response.

She put her free hand over her mouth, "No way, Ryan?"

I nodded still cheesing, "Yup that's my man."

She jumped up and down like a giddy child, “He’s so cute, how long have you guys been dating?”

“For a minute now and I love him so much Johanna, it’s mad crazy yo,” I explained as I pulled her toward the door. “Whenever I’d get sad and tell him how much I missed my homegirl, he’d always say cheer up sweet pea you’ll see her again.”

She walked with me out the door and her words were drowned out by the music so I could barely hear her when she said, “Seeing you this happy makes me mad happy for you.”

We hadn’t walked more than five feet when I ran right back into Shane and Chris, they were leant up against the wall so I stopped to talk to them, “Guys look who I ran into.”

I stepped aside so they could hug Johanna and as I looked to my right Ryan and Frank were walking toward us. I gave Ryan a smile and he gave me one in returned as he said, “Is that who I think it is?”

“Yes it is,” as I said this she turned to look at him.

He embraced her tightly as she said, “What is up.”

Giving her a look of uncertainty he asked, “Do you remember me?”

She nodded excitedly, “Yeah I remember you, Greg’s little brother.” Then she pushed his shoulder playfully.

I interrupted them, “Please tell me you don’t gotta go straight back after this?”

She nodded sadly, “I’m not even staying all night, I really came just to see you and make sure that you were okay. My mom told me I gotta have her car back by 4am so that means I gotta leave here by like two in the morn’.”

I frowned before hugging her again then I said, “I feel so loved right now.”

She smiled happily, “You know what we gotta do now, get our dance on.”

I grabbed her hand again, “Word I miss dancing with my girl.” I took Ryan’s hand too and looked at Chris and Shane, “Ya’ll wanna dance?”

We all went to the dance floor but after a few songs Chris and Shane walked off, they never did like to dance for too long and besides they had k’ they needed to sell. When it was time for Johanna to leave Ryan suggested that we walk her to her car once we were outside the club we could finally hear ourselves clearly. I tried to cram everything that happened to me since the last time we’d spoken in but I knew that would be impossible.

“Come to find out Lauren was on some bullshit, she thought that if she looked out for me I was gonna miraculously fall in love with her or some shit. She kicked me out and we got our own place now,” when I said those words Johanna’s eyes got big.

“Are you for real? Get the fuck outta here, I gotsta come visit,” she told me as we approached her car.

Ryan had an idea, “Why don’t we make plans for you to come next weekend I’ll have Frank come get you.”

She agreed and unlocked her car door, “Definitely, I’ll take off from work next weekend.”

“Hells yeah,” I added as Ryan opened the door for her. “Frank was the guy Ryan was standing with earlier, he’s cool peoples,” I explained then we took turns hugging her goodbye and sadly watched her drive off.

When we got back inside we walked around for a while eventually ending up back at the bar conversing with Pete and Vicki. I spotted Chris at the far end and when his eyes

caught mine he motioned for me to come over. I walked up to him and asked, "Whats up?"

"Yo guess who's here?" He asked me back.

My eyes widened, "Who?"

"Lauren," Chris told me before breaking out in a bout of laughter.

"Where?" I asked as my eyes darted around the club.

"C'mon," Chris commanded and started walking I followed him and we eventually found her on the dance floor with Jie and Eddie. Her appearance had gotten worse she was thinner with dark circles replacing the youthful promise around her eyes. She hadn't noticed me either she was too busy liquid dancing with her green glow sticks wrapped around her fingers, that along with her light blue hair only highlighted her zombie-ish look.

I really didn't feel like approaching her so I suggested that Chris and I dance close by until she noticed me. After a few songs Jie and Eddie came over to us and gave out hugs then I got close to Eddie's ear, "You back chillin' with Lauren?"

Eddie poked his bottom lip out playfully, "Somebody's gotta look out for her." He grabbed my hand and moved closer to me, "Don't feel bad, you did what you had to your only sixteen you didn't deserve that. We let her know girl about herself too but Rama I honestly don't think she knew any better."

Jie jumped in, "We're making her go to rehab next week and we're staying by her side until we see her walk in them doors honey." He covered his mouth with his hand, I don't know maybe he thought that there were lip readers in the club, "She almost died last weekend, it was crazy." He glanced around, "Oh shit here she comes."

When my eyes made contact with hers she smiled uncomfortably and I made it a point not to smile back or give her a hug I got right to the point instead, “You’re real fucked up Lauren.”

“I’m sorry Rama that was all Shana’s doing she got way out of hand, that’s not the way I wanted things to go down. You know I’m not like that, I was hoping to run into you so I could tell you how sorry I am. I know you hate me but I just want you to know that I’m really sorry.” She gave me an apologetic look while she waited for my response.

I could see that she was battling her own demons and I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. I noticed that Chris had walked off but I didn’t care I folded my arms as I said, “Do you know I had to kick that shit? I trusted you and ended up almost being in your same situation.” Then I added sarcastically, “Yup you’re a real good friend Lauren.” The next thing I knew Ryan was beside me.

Lauren gave him an awkward look before greeting him with an apology, “Sorry about all the drama, we never officially met.”

Ryan smiled, “What’s up Lauren, I’m Ryan.”

“Hey I’m Lauren,” she said as she held her arms out.

When he hugged her she practically disappeared in his arms, “It’s all good girl.”

I smiled and followed his lead giving her a hug as I said, “Yeah it’s cool.” She felt so fragile in my arms, “I do appreciate everything you did for me regardless of whatever else happened. I hope you get the help you need.” I shot Eddie and Jie a smile, “I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Ryan put his arm around my shoulders and we walked away when we found an open space I leaned against the wall, “Did Chris tell you Lauren was here?”

He nodded yes, "He was acting like you were about to kill her or something." We laughed at that.

"Please, that's what he wanted me to do, how would I look hitting her, she's too tiny." I placed a cigarette in my mouth and held the pack toward him, "You want one?"

He nodded yes and leaned close to my ear, "Yo, Frank wants us to house sit at his place for the rest of this weekend, he already paid me for it."

I lit his cigarette before handing it to him, "Why, where's he going?"

"Him and his roommate are going to visit his moms in south Jersey, he said someone broke into they shit last time they went out of town. He thinks it was his ex, that girl Allison, remember her?" He asked flicking his ashes on the floor. I nodded as we both stared at Frank who was just a few feet in front of us joking around with some friends.

"So we're leavin' with him?" I asked with my eyes still fixed.

"Yeah, he said that they not even going to sleep they gonna drop us off and keep it movin'," He explained.

"Okay, I mean like we can always use the money and I like his little bachelor pad, it's chill," I smiled as I leaned on Ryan. "You sold them last four bags yet?"

He nodded, "I been got rid of that shit."

I smiled as we watched everyone move about and after a few more songs I asked, "It's boutah be closing time soon, you wanna dance?"

"Yeah, you know my stilo," he said grinning as he pushed himself away from the wall and motioned for me to follow him.

Someone tapped my shoulder while we were searching for a clearing on the dance floor and I turned to see Tiffany and Denise. We embraced them happily it was good to see Denise

back out as if nothing had ever happened. We joined them and danced while we took turns gossiping in each other's ears. I noticed Brian as he passed us by but he wasn't looking in our direction I pointed him out to Tiffany and she grabbed his sleeve.

He turned to give her a hug and when he saw me he actually smiled and asked, "Where's Ryan?"

I pointed a few feet behind me at where he was dancing but Ryan was already making his way over to him. Brian happily joinedg our little circle and there were smiles on everyone's faces as we watched Denise get in the middle of it break dancing. She went from a knee spin into a back spin while we cheered her on then Tiffany jumped in front of her.

I yelled, "Oh shit, is that a challenge."

Tiffany slid the palm of her hand across her baseball cap then brought her hand to her hip and rocked her body all at once. We all took turns in our magnetizing circle...we are some of the greatest dancers in the world, we are the reflections of love, unity and powerful music.

I nodded and said my goodbyes to my friends as they were getting ready to leave then Ryan and Brian caught my eye. They were a few feet away from me saying their goodbyes, I strolled over to them smiling and hugged Brian goodbye as well then I said, "I hope you come into the city and hang with us soon."

He gave me a smile as if my invitation was unexpected then he nodded and said, "Most def."

Ryan put his arm around me as I leaned into him and with one last wave goodbye to everyone we followed Frank out of The Roxy. It turned out to be quite an enchanted night and I smiled at the thought remembering just how much I loved this club.

## 12.

Frank had a refrigerator full of food so I decided to make breakfast even though it was closer to dinner by the time I'd gotten up. I started frying the bacon and the aroma must have awoken Ryan because he came up behind me wrapping his arms around my waist as he kissed my neck.

"Sweet pea, wow you're making breakfast?" He asked playfully.

I giggled briefly, "Did you sleep well?" leaning into him as he gave me a loving squeeze.

"Yeah, I was knocked out," he went over to the fridge as I continued scrambling my eggs. After he grabbed the orange juice and poured himself a cup he glanced at my frying pan, "What's that, turkey bacon?"

"Yeah, I think Frank's Jewish," I told him then I added a few slices of cheese to the eggs. "Since we stopped fuckin' with crystal I've gotten my appetite back."

"Your skin looks like it's glowing," he explained softly touching the side of my face. "Yo, I forgot to tell you that I ran into Amy, she wants some more of the same," Ryan let me know while he took a seat at the table.

I flipped my bacon, "Oh shit hell yeah, when she want it?"

"I don't remember but I got her number this time," he explained as he pulled a paper with a number on it out of his pocket.

I grabbed the phone off the wall and dialed the numbers, "Amy?"

I talked to her briefly before hanging up and explaining everything to Ryan, "She wants to meet us at our place Monday at 2pm when's Frank getting back?"

"Monday," he informed me.

Thinking for a moment before speaking again, "Lemme call Hector too."

"Why when he see's us he'll know why we're there," he took another sip of his orange juice.

I dialed the number, "Because I'm tryna cover all angles this sale is important."

I held the phone to my ear and waited patiently for Hector to answer, "Hector?"

I told him to expect me early Monday and as soon as I hung up I prepared two plates and sat them on the table, "Dig in."

We didn't speak until we were done eating, "Wanna watch a movie sweet pea?"

"Yeah, but the air conditioning is bumpin' I gotta get the blanket," I grabbed the comforter off Luke's bed and wrapped it around me then I sank into the couch. Ryan was busy searching through Frank's movies calling out different names to me and I kept shaking my head in distaste.

I watched him as he read the back of a VHS movie jacket to himself before he said, "This looks decent."

My curiosity made me lean forward, "What movie is that?"

Ryan gave me a big smile, "Well you're so picky you might not like this one either it called "Untamed Hearts".

I clapped my hands lightly, “Oh yeah, I love that movie put it in.”

Ryan jokingly breathed a sigh of relief as he put the movie in the VCR and turned the lights off before getting underneath the cover with me. We watched three more movies after that one then we went back to the bedroom but we didn’t go to sleep right away.

Frank returned Monday afternoon I’d just finished up my cleaning when he walked in. He looked around in approval, “Wow the place looks great guys.”

I held my arms out displaying my work, “Thank you, it just needed a woman’s touch.”

I left Ryan and Frank to talk amongst themselves while I gathered our things and stuffed them into our bags. When I walked pass the hall Ryan looked at me from the kitchen, “Sweet pea hang out here for a minute I gotta run to the city with Frank so he can drop his ex’s ring off to her.”

I looked at Frank as he added, “My ex is a crazy bitch, I’m praying that this bitch will stop fucking with me if I just give her the ring back. Luke can’t do it and I don’t trust her I need someone to come with me so she don’t try nuthin’.”

“Why do I gotta stay here, drop me off as soon as you hit Manhattan and I’ll just go see Hector and meet you back at the apartment. Cuz somebody gotta be there to meet Amy,” I figured we could get both things done if we split up. I gave Ryan the key to our apartment since he’d be done much quicker than I would.

Ryan looked uncomfortable taking the keys out my hand slowly, “I don’t know if you should go see Hector alone, let’s just go afterwards.”

Frank budded in, “We’re not even gonna take that long I swear.”

"We can't lose that sale what if she gets it off someone else cuz we're not around, we tryna stack paper right?" I reminded him.

Ryan smiled in agreement while he slid the keys in his pocket, "Yeah."

I walked over to him and puckered my lips he kissed me a few times then I spoke softly, "Just don't get caught up in no bullshit, make sure you bring your ass back home."

When we got into the city Frank mentioned that there was a subway a block away from his ex's house so that's where he dropped me off. I jumped out of his car and Ryan got out behind me giving me a tight hug. We exchanged a quick kiss goodbye before he watched me walk down the steps of the train station.

When I finally reached Hector his behavior seemed a bit strange, like something was on his mind but since he was still smiling I figured it wasn't any of my business. I smiled back at him, "Hey Hector I need the same thing."

I moved close to the payphone and sat the money on the silver shelf inside of it but when I looked back up he was turning the corner. I should have noticed that something wasn't right when he didn't take my money but instead I slid it back into my pocket assuming he was going to give me credit again. I looked around at all the busy people living their lives while I waited some seemed to be in such a hurry while others were strolling about as if they didn't have a care in the world. A couple walked passed me holding hands and my eyes stayed glued on them until they were out of my sight... I missed him already. Hector finally came walking back around the corner and I couldn't believe my eyes, my mother was walking with him.

My heart jumped into my throat as I shook off my first thought to run since I was frozen in fear I had no choice but to stand there. She proudly walked up to me and pointed her finger into my chest and spoke sternly through her teeth, "Games over Rama lets go." Her hand went to my face and she grabbed it pushing my cheeks into my teeth as she squeezed, "C'mon start marching I'm parked right around the corner and if you even think about running I'll get that cop right there to toss your ass in juvy. You better be grateful that I'm only putting your ass in rehab." She yanked my arm and pulled me with her.

I looked over my slumped shoulders at Hector one last time as he mouth the words "I'm sorry" at me before turning his back to me. I walked around the corner with my mother following close behind making me feel like I was just a kid. In this free world I wasn't free to be myself and live my life that shit's pretty hard to except. How could someone else tell me what to do? I caught sight of my twin sitting in the passenger seat as my mother opened the door giving it a hard slam shut after I got in. I halfway expected my sister to greet me or at least look back at me but of course she didn't do any of that.

Leaning my forehead against the window I allowed my tears to fall as my head gently rocked back and forth with the cars movements. My eyes gravitated toward the city as we drove through it, it was always so pretty every block of it, every ally. But today...the possibility that I may never be back, that I'll never walk through these streets with Ryan again that I'll never see him again filled me with such sadness that my heart hurt. This couldn't be happening to me, not now, what will Ryan think when I never show up? I peeked through my liquid eyes at my twin sitting in the front seat looking so cruel

and arrogant. I thought I would have missed her at least a little but I felt nothing for her at all or my mother.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed but when I woke up we were in front of a building surrounded by smaller buildings and trees. I slid out of the back seat and slowly walked behind my mother the gravel crunching underneath my feet with every step. When we walked through the door I could tell that they were expecting me they already had most of the paperwork filled out. They asked me a few questions but they didn't get an answer I fixed my eyes to the carpet and didn't respond to any of them, fuck them.

My mother had finally gotten me back and all she did was toss me in some rehab in the middle of nowhere, there were no hugs or tears. My mother approached me as they were getting ready to bring me to my unit, I thought she was actually going to hug me goodbye but she took all the money out of my pockets instead.

She held it up and smiled at me, "I believe this is mine." Then she rolled her eyes coldly and walked out the door, I felt like I'd just been put in prison.

The staff walked me to another building that was close by and showed me to my room then they explained the numerous rules to me for the tenth time. I sat on the bed and watched them walk away feeling the flames of agony as it burned within me, every piece of me yearned for Ryan. I lay down pulling the stiff blankets over my head as the all too familiar warmth of my tears ran down my face again.

I never prepared myself for this, how could I survive without him? I grabbed at my chest wanting to ease some of the constriction on my heart it seemed as though it would stop beating at any given second. We'd just gotten our place and we were finally giving up crystal so that we could go to

college and get married. I couldn't handle the thought of him waiting for me and how sad he'd be once he realized that I wasn't coming back. I allowed my thoughts to break my heart into tiny pieces, absorbing every ounce of sorrow as it overflowed out of my eyes, I hugged my pillow as everything eventually faded to black.

The next morning I was awakened by a female staff member yelling down the hall for everyone to wake up. I jumped up startled, my first thought was that something happened and this was an emergency fire drill. I looked at my roommate who was shuffling through her top draw and realized that this was the first time I'd even bothered to look at. She was a petite girl with caramel skin and her hair was cut into a lopsided bob she looked at me and smiled so I asked, "What happened why we gotta get up so early?"

She gave me a tired giggle, "This is what time they make us get up every day, shit crazy."

I wiped the sleep from my eyes, "Are you fuckin' serious the sun ain't even out yet, this is some real ill shit." I sat up straight as a women came into our room.

"It's Rama right?" She asked me and held out a small white bag.

Taking the bag out of her hand I nodded yes with a blank stare as she continued, "These are your toiletries and after breakfast a staff member will walk you down to the other unit to meet with your psychiatrist." Then she looked at my roommate, "Josefina you have group after breakfast so please be on your best behavior, let's start the day off right."

She left out after that, "Oh my names Josefina by the way, ya names Rama?"

I nodded, "Yeah."

"Where you from?" She asked pointing her toothbrush at me.

"Upstate-err actually I don't even know where the fuck I am right now. Where you from?" I said letting out a defeated chuckle as I looked through the bag I'd just been given.

"The Bronx all day baby," she said the words to a melody. "Oh yeah and we in Katonah."

"Huh? Is that in New York?" I asked her with a hint of frustration in my voice.

"Umm it's really like Westchester County," She specified. "Shower time, see ya," She added with a wave and a smile on her way out the door.

I got up slowly and gathered my things, by the time I got into the shower I'd began to cry all over again. Once we were dressed we walked to another building where they served us breakfast I ate and quietly observed the room. There were only about twenty teens in my unit and most of them were girls. They wore their clothes too tight and looked too plain to be ravers although some kids looked like they might be cool, judging by the way they were all laughing they were pretty happy to be here and that wasn't cool.

After breakfast time was over a staff member lead me to the psychiatrist's office. There was an attractive middle aged lady sitting at her desk and as I walked in she raised her head from the folder she'd been reading and smiled at me.

"Good Morning Rama, please have a seat." She looked at the staff member who was on her way back out, "Could you close the door behind you, thanks."

I sat down in the chair in front of her desk and set my gaze on the floor, I hated giving doctors eye contact and besides I'd been through this plenty times before. They always ask the same questions give me the same explanations and write

me a prescription for a new medicine that I haven't tried yet. We sat there in silence while she continued flipping through the papers in the folder she was reading before clearing her throat.

"How are you feeling today Rama?" She asked me cheerfully.

"Fine," I answered her with my eyes still to the floor.

She let out a short laugh, "You know what they say about that word "F.I.N.E." can you get more specific?"

"Not really, I'm just fine." I guess she was talking about that dumb saying that "F.I.N.E." is supposed to mean fucked up, insecure, neurotic and some other shit. I found that to be quit immature of her if that's what I wanted to say I would have said it.

"Do you know why your mother put you in here?" She asked and I could feel her eyes staring at me.

"Nah not really, cuz I ain't addicted to nothin' I only do ecstasy, special k and meth sometimes when I'm at a rave or sumthin'. But none of them are really dangerous I don't mess with the dangerous stuff anymore." I said all of that and folded my hands in my lap.

"All street drugs are dangerous Rama, even club drugs and unfortunately rave parties have popularized a lot of drugs that some parents and even some doctors have never heard of. Since you haven't learned the dangers of these new drugs you believe that they are harmless or even healthy for you but they're not. This is a dual diagnosis rehab meaning we are going to address and treat your drug problem and your mental health problem. Rama are you aware that you have Bi-polar disorder?"

"Yes," I told her with a roll of my eyes.

"Well I cannot stress enough the importance of taking you medicine everyday this helps with balancing your serotonin levels," she took a deep breath before she spoke again. "Your HIV test came back negative so that is a great start, but an even better start would be admitting that you have a problem, you can't begin to get clean if you don't think you need to. Drug use can lead to long term physiological effects that can not only be very harmful, but can also result in chronic problems. The use of drugs is not the only issue you are also causing your serotonin levels to get dangerously low which can make matters worse. You do know that depression is a symptom of an imbalance in the brain's chemistry, don't you?"

I lifted my head up and looked at her briefly, "Yes." And I do know that you don't give a fuck about me you're just doing your job.

She gave me a tight smile, "Well in depression Rama, the brain levels of the well-being hormone serotonin, the reward hormone dopamine and the neurological inhibitor chemical GABA are lower than normal. When you damage your brain with foreign substances it affects you ten times worse than a person who doesn't already have a chemical imbalance. So just because your friends seem like functional drug users doesn't mean you can be, it's going to affect you much differently. You may feel suicidal, they may not so your life is literally at stake every time you use, do you know that Rama?!"

I nodded in understanding but I really didn't give a fuck I mean that was her opinion that left me wondering about Ryan. "What about ADD?"

"Well, there is a chemical imbalance in the brains of those suffering from attention deficit disorder and when you combine that with not taking the proper medication plus

substance abuse. Once again dangerously low levels will happen and this creates the same feelings of hopelessness, despair and even suicidal thoughts as with your case. Why do you ask? Have you been diagnosed with that before?”

“No,” I was still thinking about Ryan, even though he doesn’t seem to have a depressed bone in his body could that really happen to him since he has ADD. I frowned my eyebrows at the image of him feeling depressed about me never returning home leaving him to wonder if I was dead or alive. I still couldn’t see that I could only see him being calm, cool and collective like he always was in stressful situations while he spent all of his time trying to find me.

“Rama is there anything that you’d like to say? Did anything bad happen to you while you were living on the streets? No sexual abuse?” She asked.

I could hear in her voice that she thought something bad had happened to me and maybe bad things did happen to me but it didn’t matter. I didn’t carry it with me anymore, all my sadness was a distant memory that wasn’t even worth mentioning. The only thing worth mentioning was Ryan and our love but I knew she didn’t want to hear about that so I gave her a quick smile, “No.”

She examined me with her eyes, “Okay, so I’ll see you tomorrow at the same time and in the meantime I’m going to prescribe you an anti-depressant—.”

“I’ve been on a few different ones they don’t work for me,” I explained.

She stopped writing and looked at me, “Well maybe you haven’t tried the right one, which ones have you taken?”

I held my fingers out and counted them as I spoke, “Zoloft, Paxil, Buspar—”

She cut me off, “What about Depakote, have you taken that before?”

“No,” I told her shaking my head.

She looked back down at her paper then her pen began to move again, “So let’s see how you do on that okay.”

“Okay, can I go now?” I asked as I got up and placed my hand on the door knob.

She looked back up at me, “Yes you may go Rama.” I wasn’t surprised to see the staff member that walked me here waiting outside the door. She smiled at me and began walking back to the unit as I followed.

Before I knew it an entire week had passed, my psychiatrist told me I’d be allowed phone privileges once I hit two weeks as long as I didn’t get into any trouble. The first thing I planned on doing was calling everyone I knew and getting a message to Ryan. I sat at my desk and began writing down as many numbers as I could remember my roommate walked in the room and asked, “Why you writing all them numbers down?”

I looked over at her, “Oh, I’m just tryna remember all the phone numbers I know so when I get my privileges next week I can get in touch with my man, he don’t even know I’m in here.” I felt strange mentioning Ryan to her, I wanted to cherish our memories not hand them out to anyone who’d listen.

“Damn, I miss my man too,” she said sadly.

“Sorry I’ve been so anti-social but I’m fuckin’ miserable right now, I’ve never been held captive like this,” I explained slamming my fist on the desk.

“It’s all good, you sixteen too?” She asked.

“Yeah, you don’t seem like you do drugs,” I was a bit curious.

She raised her eyebrows, “Heroin.”

"You was shootin' or sniffin'?" I asked her filled with even more curiosity now.

She imitated pushing a needle into her arm, "Shootin', what about you?"

"I'mma raver, so I do alotta club drugs I use to sniff heroin on the reg but my man helped me kick that shit," I explained.

Her face was twisted up now, "Damn I heard of raves before but I ain't neva been to one, I ain't even know that black people be ravin'. Can you tell me about it?"

I laughed, "Well ravers are really cool people their race is unimportant they just have to share the same beliefs in peace, love, unity and respect "PLUR" and a lot of our parties are named after that type of shit too. It's very rare that you'll see a fight break out even though it's hundreds of kids from Jersey, NYC, Upstate, Connecticut, Philly, Boston, Cali, Detroit, shit from all over coming together to dance to the music that beats in our hearts. Our parties be the bomb and we keeps it underground like a muthfucka."

"So that means ya man's white?" She seemed to really be interested in that part.

I laughed at her, "Yeah, I love him so much. This is the longest we've ever been apart and I'm going crazy," I shook my head as I ran my fingers through my hair a few times.

"Word I gotta get the fuck up outta dis bitch a.s.a.p., my man's Jamaican and every time I call him he be like—." She attempted to speak with a Jamaican accent, "Baby I'mma get you outta deer." She sucked her teeth, "Shit I hope he do."

We both looked at our open door as one of the staff stuck their heads in and said, "Lights out girls." Then she gave us a smile as she flipped the switch.

Josefina seemed to be a nice enough girl, she was full of energy and loved to talk but I was too depressed to laugh and

talk with her. I was more than happy to climb into my bed and I would have prayed to never wake back up accept that would mean that I'd definitely never see Ryan again and because he cares whether I live or die is the only reason why I do.

The bed was hard and served as an uncomfortable reminder of where I was and tonight sleep wasn't coming to me so easily. I looked over at the glowing red numbers on the clock that sat on my desk, it was Friday again and my mind was thinking about The Roxy. I wondered if Ryan was at "Together" tonight or maybe he was still at our place awaiting my return, what if he'd given up on me already and returned home to his parents. What if they sent him to rehab too? This week without him seemed so long and agonizing I know now that I can never be apart from him again. I can't live without him my heart is more his than it is mine...it belongs to him.

I needed to focus on something else before my head got too out of control, I thought about some poetry I'd written there was one I always remembered well so I whispered the words aloud to myself until I fell asleep,

"I want to say something  
A speech  
Something beautiful  
Yet sorrowful  
All at the same time  
I want to write something poetic  
Something really magical  
Yet unhappy  
And it doesn't need to rhyme  
I want to sing something  
A heartfelt balled  
That will make you want to cry

I want to give up  
Yet I want to try  
I want to dance  
I want to move to the melody of life  
And death  
To the beat of my heart  
To the sound of my breath."

The next day went by even slower than yesterday it was a Saturday so there weren't any therapy groups and everyone was watching a movie in the family room. It was optional so I chose to stay in my room all day Josefina kept getting phone calls and she was in and out most of the time. She even attempted to call a few numbers for me but there was either no answer or the number was wrong I eventually gave up and tried to sleep the rest of the day away.

"I tried that last number you gave me and the recording said it was no longer in service," Josefina informed as she walked into the room and interrupted my dreams.

I opened my eyes and sat up it was finally dark outside and the medicine they'd been giving me had my head in a fog. It took me awhile to wake up but when I did my eyes immediately darted to the clock it was a quarter to nine. I cleared my throat, "My man was always the one making the phone calls, shit he handled everything. I guess I was too busy gettin' fucked up to pay attention, damn at a time like this I can't even remember peoples numbers." I pushed myself up and leaned my back against the wall.

Josefina leaned across her bed and slid the top draw of her nightstand open then she began putting on one t-shirt after another.

My curiosity finally got the best of me and I asked, “Umm, what are you doing?”

After pulling another shirt over her head she said, “Oh, I’m tryna take as many clothes as I can with me, I’m running away tonight. I gotta get the fuck up outta here.” Her voice was full of an anxiousness that I hadn’t noticed until then.

She had my interest I knew that this might be my only chance to get back to Ryan. I pulled my head away from the wall paying closer attention to her as I agreed, “I know right? I hate this place with a fuckin’ passion.”

She stopped putting shirts on and started putting on layers of sweat pants after sliding into a few pair she looked up at me, “Me and Evelyn are breaking outta here tonight, I’m dead serious girl.”

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up straight, “You’re serious?”

“Hell yeah, I’ve been here like five times already, I know the whole layout. After you been here for a while they start taking you on walks and shit, I know exactly where to run,” She explained confidently.

“But they got security and the windows don’t open and the front exits are always locked,” I pointed out wanting her to prove me wrong.

“We leaving out that door right there,” She pointed pass the open door to the emergency exit that was directly across from it.

I raised my eyebrows, “The emergency exit?” She nodded yes as I continue finding flaws in her plan, “Umm that won’t work because the alarms gonna go off.”

She put her socks on before she said, “Already planned that out.” Stepping into her sneakers she added, “Nikki volunteered to start a fake fight with Keisha at exactly 9pm

and as soon as all the staff go to break it up we kick the emergency exit open and be out. I mean yeah the alarm's gonna go off but we can out run them, we'll have a head start." She started pacing now I could tell that she was serious and I had already made up my mind that I would at least try to escape too, how could I not. She continued, "Right after all them trees is the highway this unit is the closest to it, we are lucky we're in this one and not the one on the other side then it would be impossible. You just gotta run straight into the trees and my man is gonna be waiting for us with his car. You down? It's gonna be 9pm soon so if you rollin' let me know."

I stood up more excited then I'd been my entire stay, "I'm down, that shit just might work." Placing one finger on my chin I thought for a moment, "So you telling me that behind all those trees there's a main road?"

"Yeah, it looks like a lot of trees but it's really just a few rows. Once I get out of here me and my man are going down south to my cousins' house and Evelyn wants us to drop her off at her peoples house in Delaware. Do you have some place to go where you won't get caught cuz the police is gonna be looking for us?"

I started putting my sneakers on, "Yeah, ya'll can just drop me off at Washington Square Park if it ain't too much trouble." I stood up and ran in place for practice, "But what if we get caught?"

"Then they just put us back in here and take away our shoes and clothes and shit, like we can only wear pajamas and our privileges get took away," she explained and I could tell she knew first hand.

"I don't even care I just need my freedom back, but what if your man doesn't show up?" I asked as I stretched my legs a bit.

"It was his idea he's the one who picked the time, I been on the phone with him all day. He gonna be there, he can't live without this punnani, trust me," she stopped talking as we heard a lot of ruckus then someone whistled loudly. "That must be Evelyn, I hope you ready girl," she smiled nervously.

We stuck our heads out of our open door and saw Evelyn running toward us while everyone else was rushing away from us toward the commotion coming from the rec room. I felt the adrenaline invade my body when Evelyn came over to us and within a split second Josefina kicked the emergency exit open. The alarm came on and it was so loud I wanted to cover my ears but I resisted the urge running as fast as I could instead. I felt like we weren't running fast enough when the bright white lights came on and I heard the security guards come rushing out from another building I felt like we weren't running fast enough.

Josefina was fast, she was ahead of me and Evelyn was right on my heels my heart was pounding as the security guard's called after us. They were quickly gaining on us and I could hear them breathing heavily but Josefina kept my focus by consistently yelling, "Don't look back you'll fall just keep going, we're almost there."

The patch of trees kept getting closer, the guards kept getting closer and everyone's breathing kept getting louder. My body was getting tired and my nerves were all over the place but I still had no plans on slowing down and after a few more feet we'd finally reached the safety of the trees. I prayed under my breath that I didn't trip over anything and just then I heard the sound of Evelyn falling but I kept going forward I couldn't look back not when I was so close. She immediately began screaming frantically, "Get off me muthafucka's, get the fuck off me."

While Josefina started yelling, “Don’t look back Rama I can see the car, he’s here, he’s here.”

She was a few steps ahead and judging by the excitement in her voice he was really there which gave me the boost of energy I needed. After a few more feet I was able to see him too, he was in a dark blue van with the breaks lights glowing bright red. He was a bit further ahead than where we would be exiting out of the woods and there was massive traffic on the busy highway. I could see it clearly now the headlights of the cars zooming past so fast that all I felt was the gust of wind they left behind. Josefina let out a short winded yell, “There’s his van, he has the door open, jump in and hold on to something.”

I was close behind when she jumped into the van and I did the same then he peeled off making me slide forward. My head banged into Josefina’s knee but I didn’t care I sat up and grabbed the front of the car seat while she hurried and pushed the door closed. We laughed in disbelief catching our breath while we looked out the back window to make sure we weren’t being followed.

I couldn’t believe it we’d escaped and I was finally going to reunite with Ryan but I still didn’t relax until Josefina’s boyfriend dropped me off at the Park. I thanked them repeatedly and before I jumped out she asked me, “You sure you’re gonna be alright?”

I nodded yes, “Yeah I’m good from here, thanks again ya’ll.” I’d never felt so happy to see the park in my life, I slid the van door closed behind me and waved goodbye one last time.

The night air never felt so alive as I made my way through it underneath the light of the moon Ryan might be here but I had to check the crib first. If he’s not there then I’ll come back

and start asking around or maybe I'll just wait for him there. Before I took another step I heard someone call out to me when I looked in that direction and saw Pete and Vicki sitting on a bench in a dimly lit spot smoking a blunt, I hurried over to them, "What's up guys, have ya'll seen Ryan?"

Pete and Vicki just stared at me with strange looks on their faces before Pete eventually said something, "Yo Rama, where the fuck you been at?"

I was taken back by the tone in his voice he seemed angry with me, "Why are you talking to me like that?" I asked as I stepped closer.

Vicki's eyes hit the ground and Pete stared off into the distance, "He thought that you died." He took a few long pulls from his blunt before putting it out and looking up at me, "Where the fuck you been at Rama?" This time his anger was unmistakable.

I answered hesitantly although I wasn't sure if he even wanted me too, I'd never seen him act this way, "My mom found me and locked me up in rehab I just got outta there tonight. Why are you mad at me Pete? Where's Ryan?" I asked feeling my anxiety growing.

He put his head in his hands, "Mad at you? What the fuck, yo?" He managed to say before bursting into tears.

I was really worried now, "Pete why are you crying, please don't tell me something happened to Ryan. Please don't tell me that." I said as a tear escaped my eye I didn't know what had happened but Pete was definitely hurting over it.

Vicki took over now with a shaky voice, "Rama I was right there with Ryan and Pete okay, Ryan was going crazy tryna figure out what happened to you. He had us give him a ride to see the dude Hector and he told him that your mom took you back home."

I nodded feeling excited again, he'd went looking for me I should have known, "Yeah that's exactly what happened, I went to see Hector and he played me out. Come to find out my mom was there parked around the corner waiting for me."

"But Rama..." her voice trailed off.

"Vicki," I called out her name trying to bring her focus back.

She actually seemed startled for a moment then she continued with her eyes still glued to the pavement, "We had to call Greg and got Johanna's number and when we called her she gave him your moms number. He hung up with her and called your house." She started rubbing her hands together nervously, "Your twin sister answered the phone, I remember clearly because when Ryan got off the phone he commented on how much you guys sounded alike—." She cut herself off again but this time she exploded into tears.

I took a deep breath, "Vicki what happened? Why are you crying like this? Where's Ryan?"

Pete finished her words for her, "When he asked to speak to you your sister told him that you'd killed yourself, he thought you died Rama. Your sister said that you'd taken pills and they found you dead in your room the next morning. Then she said that there wasn't going to be a funeral and that you were being cremated. They blamed him for it too she said that he should have made sure you were taking your medicine and getting the help that you needed. Then she told him not to call again and if she sees him around she's gonna see to it that he pays for what he did to you." Pete shook his head as he let out a crazed bout of laughter, "I told him that that shit sounded bogus so he called Johanna back and she said she'd call your house and see what they tell her. Well

they told her the same shit and when she called us back she was all upset—.”

I cut in now, “My sister’s a fuckin’ bitch, she musta figured that he’d never try to contact me again if she said some crazy shit like that, I hate her so much. Damn so you guys thought I was dead, that’s some ill shit.” I couldn’t tell if they heard me, they seemed so distant and they’d never answered my question. I asked again, “Where is Ryan tho’? Is he at our place? He’s gonna be so happy to see that I’m very much alive—wait don’t tell me he went back to his parents house,” I was still a bit confused by their behavior, I mean I wasn’t dead so they should be happy.

“He’s dead Rama, he killed himself,” Pete blurted out before more tears flooded his eyes.

I blinked a few times unable to understand what he meant by that, “Why would he do that? Why would he believe my sister so easily when I told him how much she hates me? Johanna knows not to believe anything that comes out of that bitch’s mouth. Why are you saying this? Does he have another girl at our apartment or something? There’s no need to go to such extremes okay ya’ll it’s perfectly understandable if he thought I was dead and he moved on just tell me where he is so we can talk it out,” I didn’t even believe myself as I blurted out all those words, I knew what they’d just told me was the truth there was too much pain in their voices.

Vicki looked at me with her tear streaked face, “Don’t you think I told him that, I told him that shit.” She stopped to sniffle before continuing, “I reminded him of that, I said Rama always said her sisters a evil fuckin’ bitch and then I was like we should just drive up there. He didn’t want to though he was emotionally broken down by that point and your sisters threats didn’t help.” She looked at Pete, “Why didn’t he just

listen to me, I told him that bitch was lying, I told him..." Her voice trailed off again as she rocked back in forth.

Pete wiped his eyes and sniffled a bit as I stood there frozen in disbelief after a few minutes he spoke again. His voice was flat and barely audible, "He said he knew you always felt suicidal and shit and that you told him once before that it can when it gets really bad you see suicide as like the only way out and shit." His voice became loud and he spoke clearly now, "So why wouldn't he believe your sister, she's your fuckin' twin."

I suddenly began crying frantically and Pete slid over gently pulling on my arm to sit down beside him and I did. "No, oh my god, no, no, no, please god no," was all that would come out of my mouth.

Vicki looked up at the midnight sky as she wiped her face and when she spoke her eyes stayed on the stars, "He was so upset, he just kept saying he couldn't live without you and how he shouldn't let you go alone and we were thinking that we shouldn't let him be alone. We kept him with us for like two days but he wanted to go home and go through your things so I dropped him off at you guys apartment on my way to work, he seemed like he was getting over it, ya know. We didn't hear from him the entire next day and I even thought about calling his parents but instead we drove back over to the apartment to check on him...Pete found him." Vicki explained as a weird calm passed over her.

Pete pressed his back into the bench and despite breathing in a few deep breaths he still sounded all choked up as he spoke, "I still had a spare key and he wasn't answering the door so I unlocked it and found him...he was still in bed, no note. I called 911 and they took him, he had mixed crystal, k' and valiums..."

"When?" Is all I could manage to spit out. "No, just please no," I screamed and it was full of the agony I was in. I slapped the tip of the bench with the palm of my hand and stomped my feet on the ground as hard as I could. The world had instantly changed nothing looked the same anymore wiping my face with my sleeve I sucked in my sorrow suddenly feeling a strong urge to go home. I looked at Pete, "Do you still have your key?"

He nodded and pulled the key out of his pocket then he placed it in the palm of my hand before hugging me, "This is real fucked up Rama and I'm sorry okay but don't do nothin' stupid."

I hugged him tight before I stood up and held my arms out to Vicki she got up and embraced me tightly. I wiped my tears again and forced a weak smile Vicki's voice was fragile when she spoke, "Please call me if you need me, I'm so sorry Rama but you know Ryan would want you to be strong right now. I don't think you should be alone, you can't get through this by yourself, you should just stay with us for a while at least until the funeral. Greg called Pete this morning and told him that it's gonna be held on Wednesday."

I gave her another weak smile, "I just wanna be alone and mourn him right now okay. I'll make a deal with you, come pick me up tomorrow at like noon and I'll stay with ya'll until the funeral, I promise."

Vicki sat back down while saying, "That sounds good, I'll be there first thing so be ready, okay."

"Kay and thank you for this guys...I'm happy I don't have to go through this alone," the weakness of my voice made it almost unrecognizable as I walked away.

That was the saddest, loneliest walk I'd ever taken through the big city that Ryan and I once loved so much. Tonight I died

along with him and the world seemed absolutely pointless now, maybe if I had never met him I would have never been touched by his energy and his unconditional love. Then maybe all of this would have never happened but I also would have never known that love is to life what the sun is to a flower... necessary.

When I opened the front door the apartment was dark and felt empty but it still looked just the same as we'd left it, my novel lay on the nightstand open to the poem I'd written inside. Some of his clothes were tossed over the chair I grabbed his Liquid Sky t-shirt as soon as I spotted it then I brought it to my face and inhaled deeply. It still smelt like him and I kept it close to me while I dragged my eyes across the room studying everything. It all looked so different now as I sunk onto the futon and it felt different too, now that love was no longer in this place. I stared at a pile of colorful party fliers that had caught my eye and it sent my mind someplace else, to that moment in time when I'd first started on this musical journey.

I laughed powerlessly as I shook my head at my choice of words but I wasn't talking about a chorus line kind of musical journey. I mean that breakbeat, jungle, acid jazz, ambiance, trance, house music that attached itself to your heart. That's the magical journey I went on with kids from all walks of life that came together to dance. Raves were never about what you were wearing or who you knew, but now it was. It wasn't all about drugs then either it was about going to that dance floor and letting the DJ take you on a trip, no LSD needed.

The rave scenes changed and it will continue to evolve, but my time...our time will forever be ours. I leaned forward and grabbed a random flyer and when I read it my heart caved in, "Together". More thoughts rushed into my head but this time

it was thoughts of us and the way we met there. I could see Ryan smile at me for the first time it was so intoxicating, I'd always held that tight in my mind because he'd changed my world that night. All I'm left with are memories now, a life full of memories that will soon become unclear, out of order and eventually all together forgotten.

He must have wanted to reunite our souls for eternity just as "Romeo and Juliet" had done so long ago. I smiled as I remembered him quoting Shakespeare, "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night". I laughed and whispered to myself, I'll dance with him again...a true love story never ends.

My mind was getting jammed with thoughts and emotions as I let out a short frustrated scream then I grabbed "Romeo and Juliet" off the nightstand. Turning it to the blank page at the back of the book I began to write,

"A place of our own  
A world of our own making  
Our little Oasis  
Shangri-La  
A land suited for someone as adventurous  
As we are  
And yes  
It would definitely have unicorns and pegasus  
Yes you can find that on our list  
Along with rainbows that never disappear  
And if you want to visit us  
The path of a rainbow can take you there  
In our world there would be no sorrows or fear  
No pain or longing so no one need ever shed a tear  
We'd have a feast everyday with plenty honey and cake

Everyone loves one another and we give hugs instead of  
hand shakes  
And yes, we can fly  
But not very high  
Just enough to never fall  
Just enough to scale a wall  
Just enough to perch on a branch  
In a tree top  
All with just one hop  
Just in time to watch the sunset  
While sitting with the blue jays  
Enjoying their sweet music  
As we set our gaze  
Upon the golden crystal sea  
And yes it was also just in time to see  
A mermaid's graceful dive  
Right before our very eyes."

While reading my poem I imagined us reuniting in the afterlife and living together happily.

I fell asleep in a sea of tears hugging his shirt and I awoke into a peaceful ambiance that made me think that I'd died. Upon the realization that I was still breathing fiery water slowly escaped my eyes burning my skin as it slid down my cheeks. When I sat up my tears glistened against the sunlight that engulfed the tiny apartment, I brought my knees to my chest and breathed deeply as what I'd dreamt last night suddenly came flooding back to me.

In my dream I was walking through Washington Square Park the birds, though unseen were chirping the prettiest melody I'd ever heard. The brilliant sunlight made it difficult to see but I didn't feel blinded by it, somehow I already knew

exactly where I was headed. To our bench and I knew that he'd be waiting for me, after a few more steps our bench appeared from behind the bushes and Ryan was there sitting with his head down. He lifted his head up and smiled at me as I ran toward him without hesitation. Opening his arms wide he stood up and I jumped into them then he kissed me passionately, after a few minutes I pulled away to examine his beautiful face a little more. I touched his cheeks to make sure he was real and looked into his loving eyes as I said happily, "I thought you died."

He let out a soft chuckle, "No sweet pea, how could I be dead when I'm right here with you." That's when I woke up.

I wiped my tears away, tossed my legs off the bed and pressed my feet firmly against the cool hardwood floor taking a deep breath as I sat up straight. I wanted to kill myself before I met Ryan and I'm finding it impossible not to wish for death so that I can be reunited with him.

My wet eyes caught sight of a pigeon on my window seal moving its head back and forth as it stared at me sideways with onyx eyes. It was so plump underneath its gray feathers and his puffy neck was decorated with shades of purple and blue. The black wrought iron bars made it appear as if he was the caged bird but ironically it was me who was trapped. A few seconds later the bird confirmed this by freely flying into the morning sky. I called after it, "I won't be trapped here either, without my heart."

I feel more alone now than I could have ever felt before I knew him and now he's gone, there's nothing left for me here...in this life. He was expecting me, I felt it in the pit of my soul as I stood up and grabbed my robe off the arm of the chair. I slid the belt out of it and secured it to the doorknob before tossing it over the bathroom door. I climbed up onto

the chair and wrapped it tight around my neck then I prayed that my dream was a glimpse into what will happen when I die as I kicked the chair onto the floor.

The door began to swing slowly back and forth while the pressure around my neck became more and more unbearable. My head felt like it was about to explode and as my body struggled to get air I kicked my legs about, grabbing at the belt that was cutting into my skin just before the darkness came.

## **The End**





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